

Completionism, "Good" Endings, and the Detective Genre in NORCO

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Abstract

This video essay examines how genre knowledge shapes player engagements with *NORCO* (Geography of Robots 2022). Informed by research on genre uptake (Freadman 1987), I argue that *NORCO* prompts players to adopt the hermeneutic practices of detective fiction without explicit instruction, relying instead on players' familiarity with mystery's genre conventions. I compare two of my own playthroughs, one completionist and one "anti-completionist." I explore how the game's branching endings are keyed to a player's willingness to inhabit investigative play rather than master it. Drawing on activity theories of tertiary contradiction, I demonstrate how walkthroughs, forum commentary, and community knowledge recursively influence a player's relationship to the game and alter perceptions of any "correct" mode of engagement. Ultimately, *NORCO* becomes an example of how narrative games may treat genre as something more than scaffolding. Both an activity and a mechanism of procedural rhetoric, genre interrogates how players learn to play, how they are taught to care, and how conventions themselves become sites of ludic negotiation.

Video Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

NORCO is a 2022 point and click mystery adventure game developed by Geography of Robots and published by Raw Fury. It follows Kay, an estranged daughter who has returned to her hometown, Norco, after her mother's death, only to find her brother has gone missing, and the shady research their mother was conducting before her death might have something to do with his disappearance.

The game's narrative is split into two sections, both of which overlap and intertwine. The sections where Kay is investigating her mother's death and her brother's disappearance are cut with flashback scenes where you play as her mother, Catherine. Catherine was researching the impacts of the oil industry on Norco before she died, but she also spent that time working jobs on a gig app so she could leave money for her children, knowing that she was soon going to pass away from cancer. This split narrative gives you the chance to solve the mystery from two ends: as Catherine, many months in the past, falling deeper and deeper into a conspiracy, and as Kay, picking up the pieces months later.

As the story unfolds, many elements come into play. At first, the mystery seems cut and dry—Catherine was investigating the effects of the various oil spills, chemical leaks, and atmospheric pollution caused by the local oil refining industry, so it seemed obvious that she may have been targeted by a company executive who didn't want her research to reach the public. However, this conspiracy was quickly overtaken by another. Catherine, and her family, were being stalked by a religious figure named Pawpaw, who claimed their bloodline had been chosen by God to leave Earth before its destruction, like Noah and his ark escaping the flood. There were a number of other absurd factors brought in to complicate the mystery, including a fugitive who helps you blow up an oil pipeline, a new-age Internet cult full of followers who all call themselves Garrett, brain scanning technology that eventually forms a powerful AI, and a government task force monitoring mysterious, possibly alien, activity in the local swamp.

But the thing that stuck out to me most about NORCO was how much it reminded me of... other stuff. I started comparing it to True Detective early on, largely due to its setting, aesthetics, and writing style. NORCO's complicated view of time, where past and present collapse into a single moment through the weaving narratives of Kay and Catherine, also reminded me of True Detective's ongoing references to eternal recurrence.

More than anything, though, NORCO immediately stood out as a mystery game. And because I had identified it as a mystery game, I started to play it as such. This video will discuss how my preconceptions of genre impacted my experience with NORCO, and how my approach to the game determined the narrative's outcome.

Title Card: My First Playthrough

When it comes to video games, I'm normally not a completionist. I like to play through a story at a pretty quick pace, and collecting objects or completing side quests are usually things I avoid unless they seem interesting enough to justify leaving the main story. I'm usually not tempted by trophies, achievements, or collectibles. As soon as a game starts feeling like a to-do list, I get bored.

My anti-completionist, somewhat sporadic playstyle often annoys people. My mom loves Skyrim, but she can't stand watching me play it, because I never collect any of the Nirnroot plants when I walk past them. The game practically begs you to do it, considering the plant glows and makes a sound, but I just can't be bothered with activities that are like "collect ten of this thing and you'll get a prize!"

I think games themselves prioritize completionism, too. Very often, you have to play a game more than once to get the "true" ending—like Undertale, for example. Other times, you have to collect a certain number of special items, or complete a sidequest that ends up tying into the main game—like Bloodborne. These completionist endings are usually considered the best ones, in that they offer the most narrative satisfaction.

When it comes to mystery games, however, my playing style is different. I investigate everything, I collect all the clues, and try my best to be a good detective. I like to guess where the story is going and piece together what's happening on my own. So the difference between how I play a game like Skyrim and how I play a game like NORCO is huge.

When I played NORCO for the first time, I played like a completionist. I clicked every single interactive object and spent a LOT of time exploring the different minigames. I went broke over and over using the in-game rideshare app to explore the city, which meant taking out more sketchy loans from untrustworthy characters. This style of play was actively making the game harder for me, yet I felt compelled to continue.

I credit my completionist impulses while playing NORCO to two main factors. The first is that I really enjoyed this game's setting, and although I didn't love Kay's parts of the narrative, I found Catherine's parts extremely fun. Second, and more importantly, I knew completionism was the way to go because I had been trained to think this way when it came to mystery narratives. Years of genre knowledge prompted this playstyle from me, not just the game itself.

Title Card: Genre Knowledge

Anne Freadman writes in her 1987 essay, "Anyone for Tennis?":

Knowing a genre is also knowing how to take it up: the manners are reciprocal. What do you do with a form, if you've never been taught to fill one out? What do you do with theoretical writing, if all you have learnt to read with is narrative? How do you take a parody, if you've never met parody or the genre that it spoofs? Using a text is primarily a matter of understanding its genre and the way it plays [that genre]--recognizing [the genre], certainly, but also reading its tactics, its strategies, and its ceremonial place. Learning to write, equally, is learning to appropriate and occupy a place in relation to other texts. (54)

When we interact with anything — a book, a movie, a video game, whatever — our first impressions of it are primarily genre-based. If you've seen a few horror movies before, you could probably guess after just a few minutes of watching something like Nightmare on Elm Street that you're engaging with a horror movie. Maybe it would be because of the scary music, or the camera angles, or the lingering focus on characters' emotional states. These aspects would not only remind you of other horror movies you've seen before, but the affective response they want to prompt from you—namely, fear and suspense—is a clue, too. In this way, we can think of genre as something social. Genre is connected to both the constellation of works which comprise it, and the social understanding of its defining traits, tropes, and cues.

But video games are a bit different than watching movies or reading books. You're not just passively witnessing the main character run from a scary monster, you're controlling them. Video games require player input—you have to push certain buttons to make your character run away from the scary monster. We call these inputs mechanics. Described mechanically, a game

might be a point and click, or an RPG, or a platformer—these descriptors let us know what kind of button-pressing we'll be doing. When we combine these mechanical descriptions with narrative descriptions, we get a genre set. This way of categorizing games is the most popular in common speech: genre sets like “puzzle-platformer,” “action-adventure RPG,” and “survival horror first person shooter” are all useful terms to describe games, because they account for both what you should expect mechanically and narratively.

NORCO is a point and click mystery game. Its mechanics are very minimal—you spend most of your time searching for clues, investigating, and interviewing people simply by pointing and clicking on certain objects or dialogue options on-screen. When you start playing NORCO, there is no tutorial section or outright list of what you should expect from the game. Instead, you must rely on your genre knowledge to be your teacher.

I really like mysteries. That's why I chose this game. I grew up reading, watching, and playing a lot of detective stories. I had a huge Professor Layton obsession when I was 10, watched a lot of Columbo reruns on TV, and I read Sherlock Holmes stories. I have a lot of mystery genre knowledge.

When I started playing NORCO, I knew how to play the game the “right” way without being told, because I know enough about mystery stories to understand how they should go. This is why, despite my usual lack of motivation for the completionist way of playing, I still meticulously explored every game area, catalogued every potential piece of evidence, and ran through discussions with characters numerous times, exhausting different dialogue options and angles of inquiry to glean the most knowledge from NPCs answers. I knew, even without consulting a guide or community forum, that this was the right way to play the game, because looking at everything presented to you under a microscope is what the mystery genre always prompts you to do.

By the game's end, Kay was in the rocket ship with her kidnapped brother and their mother's corpse. Pawpaw, with the help of the Garretts, had plans to send the ship up to Mars, with Kay's family, the supposed “chosen ones,” inside. But there's a malfunction: the engine doesn't seem to be working, and the Garrett in charge isn't responding on his radio. Pawpaw leaves to investigate, and with these few moments of spare time, Kay is able to free her brother, grab their mother, and flee, jumping out of the rocket and into the swamp before it ascends.

I felt okay about this ending. It seemed to tie the narrative together and answer most of the questions the story's central mystery posed, so I felt satisfied leaving it there. However, a few days later, I decided to browse through Reddit and a couple of forums to see what other people thought of the ending. It was in the comments of Adventure Vault's walkthrough that I saw this comment: (shown on screen)

I fast-forwarded through the walkthrough to the very end, to see if the ending they were talking about was the same one I got. But it wasn't! A bit more research led me to discover that I had

gotten the “good ending,” one that you could only earn by being very thorough in your investigation—the narrative reward for playing NORCO right was Kay and Blake's survival.

I was pretty shocked at this discovery. I never get a game's completionist ending on the first try, simply because completionism just isn't my thing. The idea that I had actually played something the right way for once was weird to me. And I realized that, without thinking about it, my subconscious application of genre knowledge had not only engaged with the sort of completionist metagame I usually don't care for, but also had led me to seek out what the activity theory of video games would call a tertiary contradiction.

A tertiary contradiction occurs when a new approach to play (or genre) is introduced, at odds with the dominant way of play. We might think of it as two metagames interacting and influencing one another. This happens when two players learn from each other, either by watching walkthroughs, consulting Reddit, or discussing in forums, and adopt new methods of playing. It changes the whole activity -- once you've changed your relationship to the game, it changes your perception of and relation to the game itself.

The walkthrough I watched on YouTube, and the comments underneath it, caused this tertiary contradiction in my NORCO play experience. Even though I'd gotten the good ending, knowing that there was another option—one where anti-completionist motives might actually be punished by the narrative—made me want to play it again. I was curious to know exactly what I'd done to trigger the good ending, why my completionism prompted a shift in the story's path, and how the narrative might change if I did something different.

A couple days later, with all of this in mind, I booted up NORCO and began to play once more from the beginning.

Title Card: My Second Playthrough

The second time around, I decided to do what I'll call an “anti-completionist run.” I didn't investigate any of the clue objects, I only participated in dialogue trees once, and I never engaged in any side quests. My first playthrough took about five hours, and my second one took only about three.

The first thing I noticed after adopting this playstyle was just how much the game funnels you through the narrative. Aside from a few puzzles, you really don't have to do much to advance the story, as the mystery does gradually begin to unfold even without much investigation on the player's part. This is primarily due to the split narrative—if your lack of curiosity while playing as Kay keeps you from understanding what's going on, the sections where you play as Catherine will provide enough context for you to continue to understand the basics of the story. In fact, the way that Kay and Catherine's stories are so intertwined ends up becoming the key to achieving the good ending.

The key determiner for what ending you get is actually the result of an optional side quest, which can only be accessed by thoroughly exploring the suburb behind the mall during Catherine's segments. If you duck into an open garage, you can find a man inside who tells you his son, Bruce, has joined the Garretts, and is currently living inside the mall. The man will ask you to try and convince his son to come home. Whether you do so or not determines how the game ends for you.

If you accept this side quest, you'll spend the rest of the game making only incremental progress in finishing it. First, you have to get to the part in the main storyline where Catherine downloads a voice recorder app, then you have to get Bruce's father to record a message for his son on it, then you have to manage the phone's storage space so the message doesn't get deleted or overwritten, and finally, you have to find Catherine's phone again many months in the future while playing as Kay. Depending on how quickly you play, you might spend three or four hours of playtime with this sidequest slowly burning in the background. When you finally make it to the game's final area as Kay, the payoff for your efforts is revealed: Bruce is the Garrett in charge of monitoring the rocket's launch, and if you play the message from his father asking him to come home, Bruce will abandon his post. This leads to the ending I got in my first playthrough, where the rocket fails to launch, and Kay and Blake are able to escape.

In my second playthrough, I ignored this side quest entirely. As a result, when I reached the game's end, there was no opportunity for me to escape. Pawpaw traps Kay in the throne room, the rocket launches, and then explodes above NORCO with Pawpaw, Kay, Blake, and Catherine's corpse all inside.

After finishing the game for the second time, I wasn't sure what to think. Was the narrative payoff of playing the game the "right way" more satisfying? I definitely thought so. And yet, even if I'd received the "bad" ending the first time, I think I would have been okay with it. The level of engagement I had with the game's world determined the tone of the narrative: the more I explored, the more Kay seemed to grow nostalgic for her hometown, and the more appreciative of its residents she became as they joined her on her quest to find Blake. And the less I explored, the more detached, cold, and hopeless Kay became, sticking with the same opinion she had at the game's start that the world was ending soon, and thus, it was hard to care about anything.

After playing the game both ways, I don't think I can say for certain whether it's better enjoyed from a completionist standpoint or not. I don't think it's helpful to view the game through this lens at all.

It seemed poetic to me that the deciding factor as to whether you get the supposedly "good" ending or not is your willingness to help reunite a father and his son. Making that decision reflects how much Kay regrets leaving her mother all those years ago, and more than that, it shows whether or not she's finally willing to engage with the world around her and invest in the wellbeing of the hometown she previously abandoned. I think either option makes sense, because the narrative accommodates either choice. In one ending, Kay sits by idly as she

“leaves this place behind,” much like she did years ago. In the other ending, she jumps into the swamp with her family, forced to confront the brother she abandoned and the mother she never said goodbye to. Your level of uptake in regards to the detective genre narrative determines Kay's willingness to engage with the world around her, which in turn determines her and her family's fate.

Title Card: Conclusion - “Making Meaning” Through Playstyle

NORCO, like many games, rewards a completionist style of play with narrative payoff. However, it does not do so by turning itself into a checklist of side quests to complete and objects to find. In NORCO, the only trigger to achieve that “good” ending is engaging in the empathetic act of reuniting a father and son. In this way, the good ending feels almost accidental, a single choice you could easily skip over if you were simply focused on reaching the final boss arena. Rather than rewarding mere completionist tendencies, what NORCO rewards is a humanistic approach, a genuine desire to help someone other than yourself, to fix just one small thing in this broken gameworld. Emma Goehler notes that in NORCO, “characters all find different ways to escape their reality through drugs, video games, or the idea of off-world colonization.” Kay herself has been engaging in this kind of escapism for years, running from her familial problems by wandering around the country, and the homecoming that marks the game's beginning shows her that things have only gotten worse in her absence. Goehler reads NORCO as “a story about making meaning in our own hopeless world.” In a sense, I do agree. But there is a choice to be made there—the more effort you put into helping those around you, to engaging with the game's “hopeless world” not just to complete the story, but to wring out everything it has to offer, the greater the narrative payoff. NORCO shows that our expectations of genre shape our playing strategies, can becoming a way of taking up a game: we approach its mystery according to what we have learned from other mysteries, and in doing so, our expectations help determine the story we experience.

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