

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Ori and the Blind Forest  
**Platform:** Microsoft Windows, Xbox One  
**Genre:** Story-driven Platformer, MetroidVania  
**Release Date:** Worldwide: March 11, 2015  
**Developer:** Moon Studios  
**Publisher:** Microsoft Studios  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Thomas Mahler

## Overview

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On the night of the Great Storm, a child is torn from his home, whisked away by literal winds of chance. Flung far across the forest, he discovers a new home, and a guardian whose only motivations are love and compassion. Of course, nothing good can last, and soon the past calls him back. Now, orphaned once more, he seeks to heal his dying home, and restore the eyes of a blinded forest.

*Ori and the Blind Forest* is a 2.5D platformer that puts the player in control of Ori, an agile forest spirit. Upon uncovering the circumstances of his orphanage, he sets out to restore the elements of Water, Wind, and Warmth to the forest of Nibel. On this quest, the player guides Ori through increasingly challenging networks of navigation and logic puzzles that merge fluid platforming with unlockable abilities.

The game's story exemplifies the archetype of the "hero's journey," complete with a hero, a villain, and a typical plot structure. However, this alone doesn't explain the wide praise the game has received. The brilliance of *Ori and the Blind Forest* is the ability of Moon Studios to wholeheartedly invest the player in its characters and story on an emotional level, with minimal use of dialog. Utilizing an extravagant art style, salient visual language, and a breathtaking score, Moon Studios took what could have been just another "save-the-world" story, and created a spellbinding epic that resonates stronger than many games with significantly larger budgets.

## Characters

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- **The Spirit Tree** – This is the very first character the player sees when starting the game. A gargantuan, iridescent tower of vegetation, the Spirit Tree is the life force of Nibel. Originally Sein is part of the Spirit Tree. It is the source of energy that sustains the three elements of the forest. Thus, when Kuro steals Sein, the forest is "blinded" and begins to decay. The Spirit Tree serves primarily as the

narrative voice of the story. Unlike Ori's companion Sein, the Tree is an omniscient storyteller.

- **Naru** – The first playable character, this bear-like creature finds Ori on the night of the Great Storm. Although the word is never used, Naru essentially adopts Ori, raising the spirit as her own. She eventually dies from the same decay that has afflicted the forest, compelling Ori to seek the Spirit Tree. Later on, Gumo uses a magical artifact to revive Naru, who wastes no time to begin searching for Ori. Although the player only controls her for a few brief instances, these moments amplify the already powerful characterization of both herself and Ori.
- **Ori** – This is the player character through the vast majority of the game. A petite manifestation of the light of the Spirit Tree, Ori is best described as nimble. After the death of Naru, fundamentally his mother, Ori seeks the Spirit Tree. Alone, and afraid, Ori collapses at the foot of the Tree. In a final effort to save its child, the Spirit Tree revives Ori, allowing him to begin his journey. As the game progresses, Ori gains new abilities that expand gameplay and allow the player to access areas that were previously impossible to reach. Ori's quest to restore the three elements of the forest is the game's core narrative.
- **Sein** – Found by Ori in the Sunken Glades, Sein is the “light and the eyes of the Spirit Tree.” A sentient orb of ethereal light, Sein accompanies Ori, supplying both the game's hack-and-slash gameplay as well as contextual guidance and storytelling. Unlike the Spirit Tree, Sein narrates from a first-person perspective, grounding player actions in the overarching narrative. The primary conflict is established when Kuro steals Sein from the Spirit Tree, initiating the decay of the forest.
- **Gumo** – Resembling an anthropomorphized spider, Gumo is arguably the most mysterious character. He is introduced as a meddling antagonist, preventing Ori from restoring the element of Water. However, after Ori shows him compassion by saving his life, he has a change of heart. Thus, Gumo becomes an unlikely but crucial ally, later returning the favor by rescuing Ori, as well as reviving Naru. Tragically, it is revealed that the other members of his race, the Gumon, were wiped out when Kuro blinded the forest. Despite this, Gumo recognizes the importance of Ori's quest and continues to assist him.
- **Kuro** – A giant demon owl, Kuro is introduced as the main antagonist early in the game. She is responsible for the decay of the forest, as she is the one who tears Sein from the Spirit Tree. She is Ori's most formidable obstacle, and her appearance during gameplay marks pivotal plot points. She is a creature driven by hate, and during the beginning of the game this is all the player knows about her. However, this superficial observation is subverted when Ori learns that all but one of Kuro's children were killed during the Light Ceremony. Enraged, she seeks to prevent Ori from restoring the light till the very last. Kuro's self-sacrifice at the

games conclusion powerfully juxtaposes her antagonism with her intrinsic nature as a mother.

## Breakdown

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### Narrative Structure

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell presented the idea that much of human storytelling stems from a single structural archetype. This archetype—the “monomyth” as he called it—is the hero’s journey, or quest. Campbell found that myriad stories across centuries and cultures share common plot elements. While critics have debated which elements are essential, educator Matthew Winkler, in his video *What Makes a Hero?*<sup>1</sup>, identifies eleven key events in a hero’s journey. Nine of these are relevant to the story of *Ori and the Blind Forest*, and each is emphasized below in bold.

By conforming to the structure of the monomyth, *Ori* inextricably links itself to centuries of human storytelling. However, it distinguishes itself in two ways. First is how the game’s story diverges from this traditional formula, and second is how it uses the unique capacities of the medium to support the narrative.

### Breakdown

“We shall always remember the night...” The Spirit Tree begins the tale of *Ori and the Blind Forest* in classic “once upon a time” fashion. In the opening scenes, the player is transported to the enchanted forest of Nibel. They learn how Ori, our protagonist, was torn from the Spirit Tree on the night of the Great Storm. When benevolent Naru finds him, orphaned and alone, she adopts him. For a time, all is well. Then, on the night of the Light Ceremony, the Spirit Tree calls out to Ori. When he doesn’t answer, the forest begins to decay. Eventually, even Naru succumbs to this decay. She dies, once again leaving Ori orphaned.

This is the **status quo**, literally the “state in which” a story begins. It is a ubiquitous feature of Campbell’s monomyth, and of storytelling in general. Like any good story teller, Moon Studios must first introduce its characters, and the world they inhabit. However, they also take this time to emotionally invest the player. Instead of simply *showing* us how Ori and Naru become family, the player is given control of these characters. There isn’t yet any clear objective, so the player is essentially forced to drive the story forward. This intimacy creates a lasting, emotional connection between player and character, something that a mere cutscene would struggle to achieve.

After the death of his adoptive mother, Ori leaves Swallow’s Nest, his home, in search of the Spirit Tree. Alone and afraid, he doesn’t get very far before he succumbs to the dangers of the forest. Ten minutes into the game, and the main character is on the brink of death. But the Spirit Tree decides to save its child, reviving Ori, and starting the game proper.

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<sup>1</sup> Winkler, Matthew. *What Makes a Hero?* <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/what-makes-a-hero-matthew-winkler>. Ted-Ed. 2012. Winkler video adapts and explains Campbell’s work, and was instrumental in the construction of this paper.

In a typical hero's quest, the **departure** of the hero normally occurs after they receive some call to adventure. This is when the hero leaves the comfort of home, the "Ordinary World," and enters a land of danger and mystery, what Campbell calls the "Special World." However, Ori enters the Special World—in this case the dangerous forest—without any adventure or quest to pursue. He leaves Swallow's Nest, not to avenge the death of his mother, but simply to survive. This "departure" from traditional monomyth structure emphasizes Ori's desperation in the moments before he is revived. The hero is still quest-less, but already lost in a world that's out to stop him. He's been defeated before he can even become a hero, and as a result we too can't help but feel defeated.

As he draws his last breath, the Spirit Tree intervenes, finally giving Ori his **call to adventure**. This is also when the game proper begins: the UI appears, Ori loops an idle animation, and the camera is zoomed out in true platformer fashion. Ori is free to pursue his quest, and the player is free to, well, play. In beginning the game this way, Moon Studios brilliantly mirror gameplay and narrative. A single event calls both Ori and the player to their respective adventures.

It doesn't take long for Ori to find his first companion. While the player doesn't have any clear objective yet, the game linearly guides them to a hidden glade. Here they find Sein, a sentient orb of light, who guides Ori to the Spirit Tree. Upon arriving, Sein recounts the events of the Light Ceremony. Kuro is introduced as the main villain, and the player learns that it was she who stole Sein from the Spirit Tree, leading to the decay of the forest. Sein then gives Ori (and the player) his quest. Ori must restore the three elements of Nibel: Water, Wind, and Warmth. Only then can the forest be saved.

Along their quest, a hero often gains the **assistance** of other, sometimes wiser, characters. Sein serves as Ori's companion throughout the game. In addition to facilitating melee combat, Sein guides and narrates Ori's adventure. The latter is also true of the Spirit Tree, though it functions more like an omniscient storyteller. Later on, Ori also meets an enigmatic, spider-like character named Gumo. Initially, Gumo is a nuisance who prevents Ori from restoring the element of Water. However, after Ori saves him from a cave-in, Gumo becomes an unlikely but crucial ally.

With or without the assistance of companions, a hero must then undergo **trials**. This is the "meat" of their adventure, the challenges they face in search of their ultimate goal. Before reaching the "source" of each element of Nibel, Ori must first complete preliminary tasks. These further advance the story, but also present unique gameplay challenges to the player. Additionally, each section of the game concludes in a death-defying, "no-room-for-error escape sequence"<sup>2</sup> that epitomizes the word "trial." Like any good hero, Ori must face and overcome unexpected challenges, but so too must the player. Again, Moon Studios uses the medium to reflect the narrative.

No hero's journey would be complete without a villain. As Ori's adventure progresses, the player learns details about Kuro, the main antagonist. The first time we see her is in a flashback, stealing Sein and plunging Nibel into decay. This malevolent characterization is reinforced when Ori first meets her face-to-face. Apparently, she is hell-bent on preventing our hero from saving the forest. However, Ori eventually discovers that Kuro (previously evil incarnate) is, in fact, a mother.

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<sup>2</sup> Reparaz, Mikel. *Ori and the Blind Forest Review*. <http://www.ign.com/videos/2015/03/10/ori-and-the-blind-forest-review>. IGN. 2015.

On the night of the Light Ceremony, three of Kuro's chicks were roosting in their nest, a fourth yet unhatched. She herself was out hunting when the Spirit Tree began bathing the forest in light; light that was deathly to her chicks. Despite her speed, only her unhatched egg was spared. Blinded with rage, Kuro swooped down and ripped Sein from the Spirit Tree, extinguishing the light that had killed her children, and sending Nibel into chaos.

Villains are as varied as the stories they inhabit. Likewise, some villains are more complex than others. Short stories, nursery rhymes, and mythology often feature villains with shallow motivations. The Big Bad Wolf, Beowulf's Grendel, the "troll," the "witch," the "dragon." These villains often aren't much more than obstacles for the hero. They have uncomplicated, or superficial motivations, which makes them ideal for children's stories. But the older and more experienced the audience, the more contrived they seem. This is because stories, and by extension characters, are symbolic reflections of real life. And as much as we would like it to be otherwise, real life is rarely uncomplicated.

Revealing that Kuro is a grieving mother substantially deepens her character. She is no longer just "evil," as the player can now sympathize with her complex motivation. Inevitably, the question arises: "Is she really a villain?" After all, in the words of Sein, "It is clear why [Kuro] hunts us." She is protecting her only remaining child from the death that Ori, the player, represents. Once again, Moon Studios departs from a traditional trope of the hero's journey, and once again the player becomes more emotionally invested. Of course, making your villain a mother is hardly groundbreaking (e.g. Grendel's mother). It's how *Ori* ends that truly sets it apart.

Emerging from the volcanic Mount Horu, Ori is not out of trouble just yet. Restoring the final element of Warmth within the volcano initiated a fiery domino effect. Nibel is now ablaze, and without help our hero's home will soon be a pile of ash, his efforts in vain. Thankfully, reuniting Sein with the Spirit Tree is the final step to save the forest. But just as Ori sets out on the last leg of his quest, Kuro swoops in, and pins him to the ground. All seems lost. Then, no one else but Naru emerges from the burning underbrush. Gumo, seeking to aid our hero, had used a magical artifact to revive Ori's mother. Now, as she embraces her child, Kuro is reminded of her own. She looks up, and notices the flames encroaching on her cliffside nest, where her egg remains dormant. Forgetting the hate that had blinded her, Kuro snatches Sein, and makes a b-line for the Spirit Tree. In a blast of radiance, the forest fire is extinguished, and Kuro is destroyed.

The **crisis** is perhaps the most important moment in any hero's journey. This is when the protagonist is at their lowest point. They are closer to death or defeat than ever before. They are helpless. But somehow, they're able to rise up, and overcome certain demise. Except, Ori doesn't rise up. When Kuro makes her final appearance, Ori has nowhere left to run. He is indeed helpless, but he faces an adversary he can't possibly overcome. Instead, it's Naru to the rescue. Her love for Ori is what inevitably saves him, and it's this same love that also saves the forest. Kuro, blinded with rage for the death of her children, had forgotten that once, she too was a loving mother. It takes Naru to remind her of this, but once she does, it transforms her. It's too late for Ori to save the forest, but it's not too late for Kuro to save what she holds most dear. As a **result**, Nibel is spared.

Once the Spirit Tree is reunited with Sein, the forest rapidly recovers. Ori and Naru **return** to Swallow's Nest, but this time they have company. Joining them in the "Ordinary World" is a cheerful Gumo, and a familiar looking egg. It shudders, cracks, and the credits roll.

The ending of *Ori and the Blind Forest* showcases the game's final and most prominent departure from Campbell's monomyth structure. In the end, Ori is unable to complete his quest. A tragic turn of events, yes, but Moon Studios goes a step further. Not only does Kuro save the forest, she sacrifices herself in the process. In the space of about a minute, Kuro transforms from a sympathetic villain to a tragic hero. Before they know it, the great owl is no more, and the player is left in emotional ruin: what was once an agent of malice turned out to be the most selfless character of all.

Such character "arcs" are part of a hero's **new life**. They have learned much over the course of their adventure, and have changed for the better. But it's clear that Ori has no such arc. He is just as kind and compassionate in the end as he was at the beginning. In fact, besides Kuro, Gumo is the only other character who has changed by the end of the story. This leads to a curious conclusion: If Ori doesn't save the day, and doesn't learn from his adventure, maybe he isn't the "hero." Sure, without him Nibel would still be in ruins. But from a purely narrative perspective, it could be argued that *Ori* is, in fact, Kuro's story. Perhaps she is never a "villain," but an anti-hero, who must overcome her flaws to complete the quest of saving her child.

## Strongest Element

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Moon Studios strategically employs many elements to enhance *Ori's* relatively simple story. These include a sweeping orchestral score, and seamless gameplay, not to mention a stunning art style. However, it's hard to overstate the power of characterization in *Ori*. Many have praised the opening scenes of *Ori and the Blind Forest* for how quickly they invest players in the game. The breathtaking art and score certainly contribute to this initial investment. However, it's the characterization of Naru and Ori that effectively blindsides new players. Moon Studios epitomizes "show don't tell" within the first hour of the game: Interactive cut scenes allow the player to experience, rather than simply watch, as these two characters form the bond of family. The effect? Utter heartbreak when Ori loses the only family he's ever known.

## Unsuccessful Element

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*Ori and the Blind Forest* has a remarkable level of polish by indie game standards. It gets so much right that it's hard to point out what it gets wrong. For instance, each section of the game concludes with escape sequences that test the player's skill. These timed dungeon runs are cleverly crafted, stunningly cinematic, and most of all, brutally difficult. They test the player's facility with new abilities, and reinforce the use of old ones. No quick-time events, no saving; only your skill can save the day. But in this lies the problem. In being so intense and skill driven, these challenges are practically impossible to complete on the first try. This forces the player to learn through repetition: don't jump here, wait for an enemy there. In the process, they die over and over and *over*.

This constant restarting takes the player out of what would otherwise be an intimately story-driven experience. In short, it breaks immersion in a big way. While these escape sequences are truly climactic, they suffer from a less-than-ideal execution.

## Highlight

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The game's ultimate plot twist, Kuro's self-sacrifice, is hands-down the highlight of *Ori and the Blind Forest*. The genius of Moon Studios is that they use the emotional investment of the player to create a heartbreaking ending. Having played as both Naru and Ori early in the game, the player has an experiential understanding of the bond between the two characters. They know the kind of love that is shared between them. Through the course of gameplay, the player builds up assumptions about Kuro, painting her as a malicious demon with nothing left to lose. But when Kuro watches Naru embrace her child at the end of the game, her malice quickly fades. The player immediately understands that Kuro is still capable of the same kind of love as our protagonists. The hate and rage that drove her were, understandably, a mother's way of grieving. The player's assumptions disappear as she races toward the Spirit Tree with Sein in tow. In her final moments, Moon Studios once again emotionally invest the player, but this time in the most unexpected of characters. Before they know it, Kuro is no more, and the player is left to wonder how they could have ever thought of such a selfless character as evil.

## Critical Reception

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The story of *Ori and the Blind Forest* has been widely met with praise. Many are quick to point out its relative simplicity. Gamespot's Kevin VanOrd, giving the game a 9 out of 10, commented that "It's a simple fable about the renewal of a ravaged land."<sup>3</sup> Arthur Geis of Polygon gave *Ori* the same score, echoing that "It's not the most original premise."<sup>4</sup> But most critics back step this would-be criticism by noting Moon Studios' attention to detail. Many agree that the game's introduction draws up a well of emotion from the player. VanOrd compared the game's opening scenes to Pixar's *Up!*, calling the first 10 minutes "emotionally devastating." As he says, "the characters are so expressive, and the plot development so sincere, that you'll grow to care about this lovely place." Similarly, Geis notes that "there's real characterization and personality to Ori and the other inhabitants of the forest. Moon Studios takes enough time at the beginning of the game to invest you in the story." Finally, many have pointed out that the lack of dialog emphasizes the game's visual storytelling. Geis lauds: "*Ori* treats its characters with care and respect, granting them motivations and personalities, all with almost no dialogue to speak of."

## Lessons

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- **Music is not just ambience**

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<sup>3</sup> VanOrd, Kevin. *Paradise*. <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/ori-and-the-blind-forest-review/1900-6416053/>. Gamespot. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Geis, Arthur. *Ori and the Blind Forest: The Places You'll Go*. <https://www.polygon.com/2015/3/9/8180595/ori-and-the-blind-forest-review-xbox-one-pc>. Polygon. 2015.

For many games, music simply sets the mood. It's a showpiece, a part of the environment, even an afterthought. In *Ori*, music certainly sets the mood. Every environment has a unique soundscape, adding depth to already rich visual storytelling. But music in this game extends beyond ambience. Lack of dialog allows music to tell a story that words never could. When Ori watches Naru die; when Kuro sacrifices herself; in these moments it's the score that chains the player to the characters, that carries with it their respective grief and courage. The game's score does the heavy lifting of characterization, and it's a weight that few games can lay claim to.

- **It doesn't take days to tell a brilliant story**

Big games dominate today's market. People have gotten used to huge titles (*Assassin's Creed*, *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*) adding a new installment every other year. Many of these aren't story driven, focusing heavily on multiplayer gameplay. Playing online, gamers can sink hundreds of hours into the newest \$60 blockbuster before its even off the shelves. But *Ori* isn't one of these games. It's a compact, \$20 experience, prompting one to ask, "How great could it be?" (After all, it takes under ten hours to finish). Its critical reception quickly answered such questions. The game packs a rich, salient narrative experience into an incredibly small form factor. In short, *Ori* is efficient; so efficient, that it puts much bigger games to shame.

- **Villains don't have to be evil**

A protagonist needs something to fight for, or against. But this doesn't mean that a big bad ogre is the best choice. When the player can empathize with the villain, when their villainy is put into question, that is when a story can truly resonate. By ending *Ori* the way they do, Moon Studios shows us the value of an atypical villain like Kuro. In giving her a sympathetic motivation, they are able to draw even more emotional investment from the player. In making her the ultimate hero, they subvert the archetype of the monomyth with salient poignance. Kuro was not a big bad ogre. She was a mother in disguise.

## Summation

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It's clear that the story of *Ori* follows a traditional hero's journey structure. After all, it's hard to find a story that doesn't (hence the term *monomyth*). However, the game significantly violates this structure. The hero never finishes his quest, doesn't have a character arc, and doesn't defeat the villain. And to top it off, it's the villain who saves the day. So, what? These "violations of structure" are just plot twists, and those aren't exactly unheard-of.

What sets *Ori* apart is the extent to which it emotionally invests the player. Everything from characterization, to music, to art ensures that the player has no choice but to care about the world Moon Studios has created. Thus, when it comes time to "twist" the plot, the player isn't just surprised, but moved.

The game industry can learn a lot from *Ori*. It takes the player from nostalgia to despair, to hope and to pity, all in under 10 hours. For that, Moon Studios most certainly deserves praise.