

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Little Party  
**Platform:** Mac / PC Executable, via *Itch.io*  
**Genre:** Short Story / Walking Simulator  
**Release Date:** March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
**Developer:** Turnfollow  
**Publisher:** N/A  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:**  
Ian Endsley & Carter Lodwick

## Overview

*Little Party* is a narrative “walking simulator” about an older mother and her teenage daughter’s art party. Playing as Candice, the middle-aged widow and mother of Suzanne (“Suzy”), players navigate their family’s cabin in the woods using arrow-key tank controls and a low-angle third-person camera. The only other affordance is a command labeled “Get Involved” (the spacebar), with which players can trigger dialogue sequences and interact with a small number of objects. The main thrust of the narrative concerns Suzanne and Candice’s relationship; over the single night that comprises the entire game, it becomes clear that while Suzanne’s life is really the only thing Candice is interested in, Suzy is becoming more and more independent and has started to resent her mother’s doting.

## Characters

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- **Candice:** The widowed mother of Suzanne, and the player character. A gentle older woman, who loves her daughter almost to a fault. With her gray hair, wrinkled face, and portly body, Candice exudes weariness, and it’s clear she has a somewhat lonely life. Nevertheless, her disposition is consistently positive, warm, and conscientious. Candice’s central conflict is that while she understands Suzy needs space, being involved in her daughter’s life is the only meaningful thing in her life, and she has a hard time keeping her distance.
- **Suzanne (“Suzy”):** Candice’s teenage daughter. An ambitious musician, Suzanne is bold in speech and has a sharp wit when talking to her mother. Suzy also has an insecure side, however – she’s always embarrassed to play her music in front of others, and is constantly self-effacing about her work. Besides Isaac, Suzanne

doesn't have much to say to any of the characters in the game, and often speaks in one-word answers – especially to her mother.

- **Biff:** Suzanne's friend. Biff is a bigger guy, with a friendly smile and a naive enthusiasm about everything. Because of his disposition, he's the only guest out of Suzy's friends who's able to hold a natural, comfortable conversation with Candice. Biff's artistic medium is film, and he spends the game making a movie; it starts off as a monster flick, but by the end it's mutated into "Candice," composed entirely of footage he filmed that accidentally included Suzanne's mother.
- **Nicholas:** Suzanne's nerdy, socially anxious game designer friend. Nicholas is a slight, lanky boy, with glasses and pronounced lips. Nicholas tends to be pretty oblivious to other people, and all of his conversations with Candice end up rather one-sided – he endlessly spews out these nervous trains of thought about his game project, punctuated only by Candice's polite encouragements. Nicholas is constantly stressing about the possibility of failing at his work, and at the end of the game the player finds his project to be labeled "Failed Card Game."
- **Isaac:** Suzanne's painter friend, a tall boy with dark eyebrows and a goatee. Quietly implied to be Suzy's love interest as well. Isaac considers himself a bit of a poet, and is constantly trying to speak with gravity, e.g. "*Hm... Tonight I will find the muse inside myself.*" His interactions with Candice all reek of him trying very hard to get on her good side, and he often rephrases even simple statements two or three times before Candice gets a line.

## Breakdown

If one were to assign *Little Party* a film genre, the most appropriate label would probably be "slice of life": the game follows a meandering, lackadaisical pace, and uses its dialogue to characterize rather than to advance some central narrative. In this story, Candice isn't as much an actor as she is an observer – the "goals" players are given are just little chores around the house that have nothing to do with Suzy or her friends. It's only between going about these tasks – making guacamole, answering emails, taking the dog out, etc. – that the player runs into the kids and checks up on how they're doing.

But although most of game's dialogue is pretty miscellaneous, a coherent arc does develop surrounding Candice's interactions and relationship with Suzy. Candice starts the game staring wistfully out the window, conspicuously alone in front of a two-person bed as the vocals to the opening theme drone, "*I love you so much // do you understand?*" Players shortly run into Suzy, who first treats Candice dismissively but then slowly reveals more and more affection, in her own sarcastic teenage way. Once Suzy's friends arrive, however, she goes back to completely ignoring Candice; players go on to spend the entire middle third of the game seeing very little of Suzy and having almost no direct interaction with her. Later in the night, however, players are lured out into the woods by the dissonant sound of guitar chords and a young woman's voice, only to find Suzy with her singing out into the lake. Candice "inadvertently" surprises Suzy (technically, it's required of the player to advance the game state), and the two have an awkward exchange which makes it clear that Candice isn't giving Suzy enough space. The next day, players

wake up and notice an extension cord running from Suzy's room to the roof, and they then climb up to witness their daughter playing a beautiful, positive song into the sunrise. With Candice having learned her lesson, the player has now lost the ability to move and make their presence known to Suzy – instead, the game UI pops up with the interaction tooltip “Be Proud,” at which point pressing the spacebar triggers a final fade to black.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest Element of *Little Party* is its use of music and sound – and often the strategic lack thereof – to reinforce the theme and tone of the narrative. Throughout the majority of the game, all the player hears is ambient white noise and the hollow sound of their own footsteps. These two elements combine to give the game a lonely, restless tone as Candice wanders her own house – the effect is doubled at night, when the white noise yields to cicadas and peepers from the woods around you. Fittingly enough, Suzanne is the only thing that ever breaks the quiet – encounters with Suzy are almost always set to the tune of her latest musical experiment, and are the only source of music in the game. The result is that the player, like Candice, starts to see Suzy as this source of life and energy in an otherwise lonely world; in the overwhelming silence, players often find themselves sincerely missing her, and feel great relief when they stumble upon her again.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

The meandering nature of *Little Party*'s storytelling occasionally clashes with the rigid, linear system it uses to advance the game state. There are several points in the experience where Candice isn't given any goal in particular – places in the story where she runs out of little tasks and is left to just wander the house. While flavorful, these can make it easy to “get lost” in the environment and not be able to progress the story, and it feels bad when one spends ten minutes wandering in the woods, only to realize that the story advancement trigger was somewhere in the house all along. Perhaps this one-dimensional mechanic of progressing the story would feel more natural if *Little Party* had a more centralized narrative, but because there's so much miscellaneous action all the time, this system feels clunky and artificial.

## **Highlight**

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*Little Party*'s shining moment is also one of its subtlest ones, the sequence where Candice follows the sound of Suzanne's guitar and surprises her by the lake. The scene starts off ominously – after falling asleep reading a book, the player hears the low, attenuated sound of guitar chords and a young woman's voice. Following the 3D location of the sound leads the player deeper into the woods than their dog would earlier let them go, through a thicket of trees and over a log bridge. Finally, players arrive at the lake, where they discover the source of the noise to be Suzanne, facing the lake with her back turned to Candice. The moody melody builds and builds as players approach their daughter, but just as it reaches an emotionally climactic volume, it abruptly cuts and Suzy's sprite reverses, showing a startled and embarrassed look on her face. What follows is a painfully awkward conversation – Candice praises the song but Suzy shamefully disparages it as “sloppy,” and then the two go trade several rounds of ellipses.

I love this scene because it perfectly captures the game's theme of poking too far into others' space. As a player, I was really interested in hearing this new and much emotionally darker strain of music from my daughter, but when I got too close and it cut out, I instantly had this feeling of regret, like I pried too deep and violated an important moment for somebody I cared about.

## Critical Reception:

Being a small, low-profile *itch.io* game, *Little Party* didn't get much critical attention at all, and the press it did receive consists entirely of short-form infopieces rather than formal scored reviews.

Nonetheless, what little response there was to the release of *Little Party* slants positive. [Chris Priestman of Kill Screen](#) praises the game's representation of motherhood's sacrifices, and expresses a strong reaction to the passive role the game puts you in. He remarks, "You have to hold back from getting involved. You have to let it all happen without you. And that's hard." [Offworld's Leigh Alexander](#) called the game "terribly simple, [yet] evocative," and celebrates how she "experienced so much tenderness at the simple act of hovering in the background." Both critics cited identifying with Candice's suppressed nervousness about all the young people around her doing crazy things, and applauded the game for representing the perspective of an older female character.

## Lessons

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- *Typography can be a tool for storytelling.* While the game is mostly free of UI, it does use onscreen text in two contexts – tooltip text that appears when the player can trigger an interaction, and dialogue text. While the former manifests in a thick, bold, all-caps font big enough to cover the lowest quarter of the screen, the game's dialogue text is drawn in a tiny white 12pt script, always surrounded by a completely black background. This typographic dichotomy goes a long way towards expressing Candice's character; at the very start of the game, the player walks up to their daughter and sees their very first tooltip message: "SUZANNE." Here, the weight and gravity of the tooltip font expresses the strength of Candice's love for her daughter. But when the player hits space to engage with her, the game switches to the tiny dialogue font, displaying an awkward exchange between the mother and daughter. In the transition from the big bold tooltip font, to the tiny white dialogue text, players how the depth of Candice's feelings are simply not reflected in her verbal exchanges with her daughter.
- *Environmental storytelling allows subtlety, and rewards exploration.* The house in *Little Party* is packed to the gills with interesting objects, many of which introduce story information not available anywhere else; for instance, the two pillows on Candice's bed and her family portraits reveal that she's a widow. These little details encouraged me to poke around every little nook and cranny of

the property, and really got me into the mindset of a nosy mother who can't let well enough alone.

- *Waiting can be a powerful tool.* While most modern games scoff at the notion of intentionally halting gameplay, *Little Party* uses its “dead time” to great effect. After Candice completes each of her little chores around the house, the player is shown a black screen and white noise for a solid ten seconds before they're allowed to continue. This reinforces the restrained, thoughtful nature of the game, and encourages a bit of reflection before additional story content is doled out.
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## **Summation**

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*Little Party* may not be a well-known or critically acclaimed piece of work, it's a unique example of a game which tells a compelling story without making the player the key actor. The defining feature of games as a medium may be their interactivity, the ability for the player to get involved in the story, but I found with *Little Party* that I really enjoyed having this expectation of agency subverted. Coping with my powerlessness as a player perfectly helped me empathize with Candice's own struggle to step away from her daughter's life, and led to an emotionally resonant experience that put me in a vastly unfamiliar perspective.