

# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name (one name, please):** James Laks  
**Your school:** Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
**Your email:** laksj@rpi.edu  
**Month/Year you submitted this review:** November 2017

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**Game Title:** Firewatch  
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**Genre:** Adventure  
**Release Date:** February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
**Developer:** Campo Santo Productions LLC  
**Publisher:** Campo Santo Productions LLC and Panic Inc.  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Olly Moss, Sean Vanaman, Chris Remo, Jake Rodkin

## Overview

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*Firewatch* is a first-person adventure game in the “walking simulator” style set in the Two Forks region of the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming, USA. It follows the summer-long work of newly-hired fire lookout Henry as he tries to cope with the rapid onset of his wife’s mental illness amidst the threat of wildfires, psychological experiments, and the worst of all horrors: drunk teenagers.

After establishing Henry’s backstory with an exposition dump in the form of a pre-gameplay text adventure, *Firewatch*’s compelling, environmentally-driven plot begins as a simple day-by-day look at the job of a fire lookout in the Wyoming wilderness, but it quickly descends into mystery and intrigue bordering on psychological horror as Henry and his supervisor Delilah find themselves being stalked and recorded for what they think is experimental testing, all while trying to manage the June Fire, which has broken out during Henry’s time in Two Forks.

With a narrative supported by visuals and environment just as much as characters and dialogue, combined to create a deceptively complex tale of intrigue and terror, *Firewatch* serves as a masterclass in environmental storytelling.

## Characters

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- **Henry** – The player avatar in *Firewatch*, Henry is a new employee of the Shoshone National Forest Service as a fire lookout. He is responsible for ensuring that fires do not start in his jurisdiction (Two Forks), and making sure that if they do occur, they are reported and monitored. Henry is a kind and considerate man with a sometimes crass manner of speech, capable of some serious banter with the

far more verbal Delilah. He is clearly driven by his love for his wife, even if that drive is to escape from her situation, as well as by a search for the normalcy that he thinks he will find in the Wyoming wilderness. In taking his position in Shoshone, Henry wants to escape the stress and toil of taking care of his ailing wife, Julia. As a character, Henry has a good balance of pre-determined characteristics and player-driven development. He has enough pre-written that he can fit into a linear story like that of *Firewatch* in a way that complements it and completes it, but leaves enough up to the player that he still feels relatable to each person that plays the game and leaves players emotionally invested in his character. Henry is also the only character in the game with a definite appearance, as shown in multiple sketches and the photograph on his desk of him and Julia (where Henry is the only one fully visible), symbolizing the fact that the only person that Henry and the player are completely sure about are themselves. He is torn by his decision to work at Two Forks, and a good deal of his conversations with Delilah concern whether he left because of his wife's dementia or if he took the job in spite of it.

- **Delilah** – Henry's supervisor in Shoshone and one of the few sources of human contact for the player throughout *Firewatch*. Mechanically (and literally), she serves as the "walkie-talkie" voice for the player, much like the voice of Atlas in *Bioshock*. She guides Henry's actions through her directions and objectives in the otherwise mostly open map of *Firewatch*, and serves as an emotional outlet for both Henry and the player. Delilah is a sweet, but crass young woman who thinks she has a knack for figuring out what makes people "tick". She has some trouble finding the "line" when prying into the personal lives of others, specifically Henry, but that really just comes as a side effect of her isolation in her tower. She also seems to have a habit of lying to others. When she first talks to Henry, she hides the fact that she's drunk; she lies about her reason for working in Shoshone when Henry asks her; she lies to the police when filing her report about Chelsea and Lily's disappearance; however, despite these lies, her eventual openness with Henry and her overwhelmingly friendly attitude makes both Henry and the player trust her implicitly from the first time they hear her soothing voice over the radio. There is clearly some level of romantic attraction between Delilah and Henry, despite having never met in person.
- **Julia** – Henry's wife. Julia suffers from early-onset dementia and Alzheimer's, which are now in late stages at her current age of 43 as of the start of *Firewatch*. She is not present in the game apart from the expositional text adventure before the actual gameplay and a dream that Henry has where he speaks to her over the radio, but the player is still given a good idea of what she is like. She is a soft-spoken, incredibly caring, and generally lovely woman with a passion for botany and a love of dogs. She shows affection for Henry and their future children by calling them dummies and little idiots, but it is clear that she means it in the nicest possible way. Her main purpose in the story is to push Henry towards taking the job in Wyoming, as well as provide internal resistance in Henry towards the possible romantic attraction between him and Delilah.
- **Ned Goodwin** – A former lookout at Henry's tower of Two Forks, Ned brought his son Brian with him on his lookout despite the fact that it was against

regulation to have a child in the lookout tower. Ned is an Army veteran, and was discharged when his mother, who was caring for Brian while Ned was deployed, passed away, leaving Ned as the only next of kin. He has a vast set of outdoor skills which he wanted to pass on to Brian. Though Delilah sees him as a terrible person and neglectful father, and blames him for Brian's death, Ned reveals to Henry that he only wanted Brian to be able to do the things he could, and simply didn't know how to raise Brian any other way. He spends the game antagonizing Henry and Delilah to keep them from discovering Brian's body in Cave 452 by making them believe they are under surveillance by some kind of experimental group. He secretly remained in Two Forks for three years after the death of his son and moved once the two fires in the game force everyone out of the area.

- **Brian Goodwin** – The son of Ned Goodwin, Brian was 12 when his father took him to Two Forks to live with him while he was posted there as a fire lookout. Brian was incredibly nerdy and brought his hobbies of tabletop gaming and roleplaying out to Shoshone with him, making a fantasy map of Two Forks and creating a fort to get away from his father. Brian was killed in a climbing accident in Cave 452 when he failed to sink his piton correctly and fell to his death. Ned's covering up of the incident is the reason that he antagonizes Henry and Delilah throughout the game.

## Breakdown

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The core of *Firewatch*'s story rests in the sudden inversion of expectation for both player and character. The peaceful surroundings, isolation, and arboreal nature of the Two Forks area in which the game is set allow for a multitude of carefully planted reversals that form a complex mystery from Henry's simple job as a fire lookout.

From a gameplay perspective, *Firewatch* is split into eleven (or twelve) distinct chapters, each one detailing a day in Henry's experience as a fire lookout (with Day 77 being split into two distinct sections); however, the narrative structure of the game can be split instead into three larger acts, with Act 1 (setup and initial hints of mystery) covering Days 1-64, Act 2 (mystery plot and reversals) being Days 76-78, and Act 3 (solution of the mystery and revelation) being Day 79. There is also a Prologue, consisting of the initial text adventure and hike to Two Forks Lookout.

*Firewatch* begins with a text adventure detailing the history of Henry. It begins with his introduction to his wife Julia, and continues through their relationship, covering their decision to marry and have children, adopt a dog, and eventually allowing the player to experience Julia's decline into early-onset dementia from Henry's point of view, allowing him to make choices along the way such as what type of dog to adopt and what to name it, or how to best take care of Julia as her mental state declines. Spliced in are short sections of first person gameplay, allowing the player to take control of Henry during his hike towards his new summer lodging. These choices and spurts of gameplay help the player to feel involved and invested during what would normally be a long exposition dump, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility of Henry's story in the player.

The first act begins with Henry's first few days in Two Forks. He confiscates illegal fireworks from some drunk, skinny-dipping teenage girls who, predictably, take great offense to it. He finds the locked Cave 492 on his way back to the tower as he runs from a coming storm, but is told by his supervisor Delilah over the radio that the keys were lost 3 years ago. He finds his tower burgled and ransacked, but leaves it wrecked until the next day. Delilah sends him out to scout a downed telephone wire so they can phone about the break-in, but Henry finds it's been cut, not blown down by the storm like they thought.

Empty beer cans and a message written on a pair of the teen girls' underwear points to them as the culprits. Henry follows the trail of cans, finding a backpack labelled "Brian Goodwin" containing ropes and a camera. Delilah explains that Brian is the son of a previous lookout, Ned Goodwin, an army veteran that she believes to be a terrible father for bringing Brian out to the lookout against regulations and who left his post without a word three years prior. Upon finding the girls' camp Henry sees it's been torn to shreds, with a note from the teens blaming him for it and scolding him for stealing their underwear. Perplexed, Henry turns in for the night before patching up his broken window the next morning and telling Delilah he's ready to really start work. A few days later, Delilah informs him that the teens have been reported missing, and warns Henry that he might have been the last one to see them. The next few weeks involve a dream-conversation with Julia over the radio, a supply run, and the start of a large fire, as well as the development of a very close personal connection between Henry and Delilah, each wishing that they weren't separated by 10 miles of aspen trees. These first few chapters set up the normal pattern of life for Henry and Delilah and establish their relationship as characters. The objectives they contain also take Henry all over the map, helping to orient the player and make them learn their way around Two Forks.

Delilah radios Henry, who is fishing without a permit, at the start of Act 2 (Day 76), asking him to look for signs of a "problem bear" by the lake. Unfortunately, Henry doesn't find a bear. What he does find is a clipboard with a transcript of their conversation from Day 64 (the start of the fire), and a radio with the label "Wapiti Station" on it. Before he can make sense of either, however, he is knocked out from behind, with both items taken before he comes to. Delilah directs him to Wapiti Meadow, the closest thing to what Henry said, as confusion and fear start to grip them. This is both the first revelation and reversal of many, with Henry's isolation being shattered as he discovers that they are being watched. After failing to find a group of firefighters to help break into a large chain fence that Henry finds surrounding Wapiti Meadow, Delilah realizes that their radios must be tapped, and tells Henry to return to the tower.

She calls him the next day, sending him to Cottonwood Cove to retrieve a new, untapped radio before he heads back to Wapiti Station. On the way, Delilah realizes that if they were being recorded, then there was a record of her lying on a report and saying that neither she nor Henry had ever seen or talked to the missing teenagers from Act 1. After reaching the station, Henry breaks through the fence, and the player is given the option of another clue as to the nature of their stalker. In a box labelled "Wapiti Station" inside the fence there is a memo stating that the research station is only staffed from

August to October, with the current date being sometime in July, meaning the station should be empty.

Henry heads down to find sophisticated communications equipment and a soil grid (another sign that this research station is not as sinister as Henry suspects) before finding a strange signal tracking device in a tent, alongside a board tracking his movements and activities. Amongst the clutter he also uncovers psychological evaluations of himself and Delilah, each containing information they'd never told each other over the radio. Delilah remarks they should burn the place down, but Henry objects and leaves, only to find that someone has set the camp alight in his stead as he hikes away from the station. Later that night, the signal tracker goes off, and Henry follows it to find an alarmed backpack with the key to Cave 492. Still confused and paranoid as to what's going on, Delilah suggests that Henry have a drink since he's back at his tower, to which Henry replies that he's still out with the backpack.

Henry rushes back to the tower to find a cassette tape and player taped to his door, containing audio from the research site making it sound as if Delilah and Henry started the fire. The next day, Henry goes down to investigate Cave 492, but is locked in from the outside once he enters. After making his way through and spotting a sneaker on a lower ledge, Henry finds an outcropping that Brian Goodwin used to use as a getaway from his father, containing his tabletop RPG materials, drawings, and his father's climbing pitons. This sequence offers a great opportunity for exploration and characterization of Brian Goodwin, as the various materials in "Fort Goodwin", such as the note he left for a ranger asking to send the pitons that he hid from his father back to his home in Nebraska, show the kind and caring kid that Brian was when he was at Two Forks with Ned.

After venturing back into the cave with the pitons, Henry finds at the bottom of the shaft a figure, which he realizes upon closer inspection is the corpse of Brian Goodwin. Shocked, he exits the cave and informs Delilah, who reveals that she could've saved his life if she'd reported Ned for having a child in his watch tower, blaming herself and Ned for Brian's death. The chapters of Act 2 contain most of the escalation of Henry and Delilah's paranoia regarding their stalkers, as well as the bulk of the investigation into the mystery of who those stalkers might be. Day 78 contains what is likely the second most important revelation of the plot – that Brian Goodwin was dead and lying at the bottom of Cave 492.

Act 3 is the shortest act, consisting only of Day 79, which details the emergency evacuation of Two Forks after the merging of the Day 64 fire and the Wapiti Station fire. Before evacuating, Henry picks up a signal on the tracker from the research station and goes to investigate, finding a tape with his name on it next to a climbing rope. On the tape is recorded a message from Ned Goodwin, explaining that Brian died in a climbing accident after he sunk his piton poorly and fell. Ned decided not to return to society and instead made a camp in Two Forks.

Henry then climbs the rope and finds Goodwin's camp, which contains evidence linking him to all of the different events throughout the game – cutting the telephone wire, trashing the teenagers' camp, recording their conversations, tapping Henry and Delilah's radios, and falsifying the psychological research at Wapiti Station to try and keep them away from Brian's corpse. The player, after gathering as much evidence as they want, is instructed by Delilah over the radio to come to her tower for an evacuation helicopter, but when they arrive at the Thorofaire Tower (Delilah's lookout), she's gone. She explains that she didn't want to meet Henry for the first time still brooding about the death of Brian Goodwin and that Henry needs to go visit Julia, even if she won't remember him. Henry eventually agrees and gets on a helicopter, having contact with an actual person for the first time since the start of the game before the credits roll.

The revelation of Act 3 that Ned Goodwin was hiding in Two Forks and antagonizing the player to keep them from Brian seems like it has no basis at first, but closer inspection causes the situation to become clear. Brian clearly died climbing, as seen in Act 2, and the pictures of Brian and the father's day card that Ned keeps in his camp show that Ned loved Brian very much, contrary to Delilah's belief. This, compounded with the fact that Ned and Brian vanished three years prior to the game's start, the same time the keys to Cave 492 went missing, builds a stronger case. Act 3 serves as the final revelation of the game's plot as all of the smaller bits of planting from the previous two acts come to fruition and converge on Ned Goodwin trying to protect his son's remains.

The story of *Firewatch* interacts with its gameplay in a very interesting way: the story *is* the gameplay. The purpose of the objectives given to the player are very clearly meant to serve and propel the story, making the advancement of the story the primary progression of the player. This system is also supported by a secondary system that serves to challenge and reward the player in addition to the story – navigation and traversal. The game has a distinct lack of external or out-of-character guidance with regards to navigation and objectives, with the player relying solely on their instincts, their map, and their compass (later their signal tracker) to find their way through the wilderness of the Two Forks region. This rather analog method of game space traversal, combined with the variety of tracks and shortcuts that can be discovered and navigated, give the player a sense of accomplishment and pride whenever they reach a new and different area or find a fresh, creative way to reach one they've already visited.

The use of radio communication in the narrative also helps to increase the interactivity of *Firewatch's* story. While most games that utilize the "walkie-talkie" method of information delivery simply involve a disembodied voice speaking to the player character, *Firewatch* adds a gameplay effect to it by attaching the voice to an actual, physical object with which the player can interact, and by allowing the player to respond to the voice and hold conversations with it, helping keep the player immersed in the game's environment even when exposition and character objectives are given. The gameplay also offers a lot of illusory choices. During the Prologue and all of the player's interactions with Delilah, choices are offered that are each unique and have distinctly different outcomes; however, no matter what the player's choices are in the text

adventure or conversations, the overall outcome is always the same: Julia's condition worsens and she returns to Melbourne, Henry comes to Wyoming, Delilah leaves before Henry reaches her post, and Henry agrees to go visit Julia when he goes home. Despite the overall lack of change in the narrative, it still feels organic and purposeful, rather than cheap. From a narrative perspective, each of the options logically leads back into the main linear structure, but this also works on a thematic level. In line with Julia's dementia, and Henry's experience in watching his marriage decline because of it, the illusion of choice that Campo Santo provides the player suggests a feeling of hopelessness, that no matter what they choose the game will always end the same exact way.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest piece of the narrative of *Firewatch* is the game's use of environment in its storytelling. The massive expanse of beautiful wilderness both creates a sense of wonder in the player as they view the incredible natural world around them, but also fosters fear and dread in what might be lurking in the unknown parts of it, beyond what the player can see. This combines with the relatively slow movement speed of the player character, the use of a physical map and manual orienteering to navigate, and the absence of any out-of-character cues as to the player's objective beyond a reminder of Delilah's last directive above the map to make the player feel lost in the wilderness, and force them into isolation. The player also does not see another human face for the entirety of the game, and only has meaningful contact with a voice over the radio, which further pushes the player into a feeling of total separation from anything outside of Two Forks.

*Firewatch* also uses its environment to provide clues (or things that are perceived as clues) to aid in solving the game's plot. One such instance is the use of the beer cans when Henry seeks out the downed telephone line on Day 2. It is visually obvious to an observant player that the beer cans found by the downed line are the same as those drunk by the two teenage girls by Jonesy Lake on Day 1, and are found alongside a marked pair of women's underwear that the player saw also belonged to the girls. This combination makes it seem as if the line was cut by the teenagers, and the beer cans form a trail that the player can follow instead of their map that leads towards their camp.

Upon reaching the camp and finding it torn up the player discovers a letter. Many players might simply pick it up and report it to Delilah, but if they actually read it, it implies that the pair think Henry stole a pair of their underwear and trashed the camp, meaning that the underwear at the downed line may not have belonged to the girls (or at least they didn't put it there). Another such instance is an optional encounter when the player first enters Wapiti Station. If the mailbox is activated the player finds inside a letter stating that the scientists at the station are only there from August to October, with the current day in-game being sometime in July, and thus the station should be empty, providing another clue that something beyond the perceived eavesdropping and observation was afoot. While these clues give observant players the upper hand in uncovering the game's plot, they are completely optional, and don't affect the baseline understanding of the story.

## Unsuccessful Element

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While the rugged, manual navigation of the large game space of *Firewatch* makes for an authentic and unique experience that provides the foundation for one of the game's core emotional concepts, the repeated movement through the map at the player's low speed can become frustrating and tiring, especially when the player is forced to traverse the same terrain multiple times, such as when climbing several rock formations in quick succession, leading to a train of identical, rather slow animations. Although the game does introduce some tools to create shortcuts such as the axe and pitons, they are introduced too late in the game to make a large difference in the speed at which the player traverses the game space. This lack of mobility becomes most apparent in the final chapters of the game as the narrative pace increases rapidly, leaving the player feeling as if their physical movements are causing them to lag behind the movement of the story. At its peak, this gap between the narrative pace and the player's pace verges on the creation of ludo-narrative dissonance, with the player character's slow movements undermining the sense of urgency instilled by the environment and other characters in sequences like the hike to the evacuation point on Day 79.

## Highlight

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The culmination of *Firewatch*'s narrative is the player's discovery of Ned Goodwin's camp on Day 79 before they are forced to evacuate. Although it is technically optional, Ned's explanation of past events through the use of the Walkman tape baits the player into climbing the rope to the camp, and once inside all of the morsels of the game's mystery that have been both given to, and discovered by, the player fit together into a picture that is finally complete. The player is shown the sleeping bags and magazines of the two teens, as well as their partially-disassembled stereo, showing Goodwin's involvement in the loss of the telephone line. Drafts of the psychological reports on Henry and Delilah are strewn across the table and floor, linking him to the Wapiti Meadow tent. The player sees his radio base station and transcripts of their conversations with Delilah. However, despite all of these strings connecting the pins that the player has been putting up throughout the game, the camp and tape also give them another perspective on Ned, one much more positive than Delilah's anger with him. A father's day card and a picture of Brian hang on one of the walls while a coffee pot and food scraps are strewn on the ground. Ned has a lawn chair set up at the rear of the camp site to give him a beautiful view of the Two Forks region below him. When the player listens to the tape, they hear Ned speak for the first time and hear the genuine anger and sorrow in his voice when he talks about Brian's death. These all help to create a full image of Ned for the player – a deeply flawed man who has lost the thing he loves most and just wants to be left alone.

## Critical Reception

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- **IGN – Ryan McCaffrey – 9.3/10** – Ryan McCaffrey of IGN writes that *Firewatch* has dialogue that leads to an incredibly convincing and real relationship between Henry and Delilah, despite their lack of physical contact, as well as stating that the game's script is comparable to a compelling novella, with incredible emotional twists and turns. He goes on to say that he did not find the



- revelation he was looking for in the game's ending, but was still satisfied and found himself looking back for missed clues that would have led him to the plot's finale.
- **Polygon – Colin Campbell – 8.5/10** – Polygon's review praises *Firewatch's* story as a well-told narrative of loneliness and paranoia. Colin Campbell writes on player investment and Henry's personalization: "Many games ask that you personalize by choosing a hair color or shoe size. But *Firewatch* requests that you choose a pet and name it, or that you pick from optional ways to interact with Henry's unwell wife during the early backstory. These mini-choices demonstrate a sense of humor, while creating empathy. *Firewatch* is a subtle story told with economy and verve." He later goes on to say that *Firewatch* is much like the equivalent of a page-turner in the video game world.
  - **Gamespot – Scott Butterworth – 7/10** – The Gamespot review of *Firewatch* provides more praise for its use of Henry and Delilah's relationship, saying that it is less of a dedicated character study, and becomes more of a reflection of how the two grow to trust and care for each other. It was less approving of the main plot, however, showing displeasure with the amount of dead ends and red herrings that the main mystery focused on, as well as saying that the actual resolution of the main story did not make much sense.

## Lessons

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- **Your environment has a story – let it speak.** Every environment in a game has a history. It wasn't always the way it was, which means that something had to change it. Let your environment tell the story of how it changed. In *Firewatch*, the player would be able to tell when the firefighters are performing controlled burns to halt the spread of the wildfire because large, but precise, swathes of the forest are seen burned in the later days of the story. As the June Fire (or the Flapjack Fire) rages, the sky gets greyer each day as it fills with smoke and ash from the growing blaze. The broken bridge leading to Camp Arapahoe and the run-down lean-tos inside show that the Scouts hadn't used that camp in a long time, and the gridded soil in Wapiti Station showed that eavesdropping and espionage weren't the purpose of the research there. *Firewatch* does a great job of letting its environment tell a story, whether it is related to the main plot or not.
- **Do, then Show, then Tell.** Games are about interactivity. Without something to do, the game simply becomes a movie, and the player becomes an audience. The player will always be more engaged when they are performing an action, selecting dialogue, or simply controlling what they are looking at. *Firewatch* utilizes this principle excellently in its highly manual approach to both gameplay and storytelling. As the player, almost nothing is done for you in *Firewatch*. You must navigate using a map and compass, track your position and objectives, and even seek out and piece together the story on your own with little help from the game. *Firewatch* only really hands the player information when it couldn't be effectively conveyed through action (identifying Brian Goodwin's corpse, for example), and leaves much up to the player when it comes to the actual gameplay. This concept also comes into play during the game's opening exposition dump. Henry's backstory is determined through an interactive, choice-based text adventure,

which makes the player feel as if they are experiencing Henry's story instead of simply having it told to them. This gives the player a sense of agency and helps imprint them onto Henry and form a stronger connection between player and avatar, something that does not usually occur in more classical forms of exposition.

- **Games are interactive stories, meaning that story can also be gameplay.** Although *Firewatch* is very light in the way of mechanics and actual elements of gameplay, the game is still incredibly engaging and rewarding because it treats its story as gameplay. The game's plot is about Henry and Delilah's struggles trying to uncover whatever is watching them, but on a smaller scale there is a story about a player trying to find a path to Cottonwood Cove, or finding a turtle, adopting it, and naming it Turt Reynolds. These smaller stories help connect the player to the larger narrative, and make the advancement of that narrative into a gameplay focus.

## Summation

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*Firewatch* is a masterclass in environmental and linear storytelling, with a narrative that is well-balanced alongside relatively minimal gameplay effects to create an authentic-feeling, awe-inspiring, and occasionally terrifying experience in the Wyoming wilderness. Despite the amount of criticism given to many "walking simulators" like this one, Campo Santo, through *Firewatch*, have proven that compelling stories and emotionally gripping characters can take even the most minimalist gameplay and create a riveting and satisfying experience. Campo Santo's dedication to interactivity and player investment in their narrative has created an experience that, while authored and dictated by the developer, still feels deeply personal to the player. Their excellent use of their small development team and the multi-faceted work of their writers and designers has helped *Firewatch* to become an enthralling, well-rounded narrative experience.