

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: What Remains of Edith Finch

Platform: Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One

Genre: Mystery Adventure/Walking Simulator

Release Date: April 25, 2017

Developer: Giant Sparrow

Publisher: Annapurna Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ian Dallas

Overview

What Remains of Edith Finch is a hauntingly beautiful game that explores of life, death, and acceptance, and how one family deals with (or in some cases, doesn't deal with) all 3. The Finch family is a creative and talented family of people who live in a gigantic, twisted mansion in the Pacific Northwest. Despite their skills and generally happy livelihoods, the Finches shoulder a terrible burden. Legend tells that the family is afflicted by a terrible curse--a curse that takes the lives of family members well before their time. Over the years, the family curse has claimed the lives of Finches young and old alike, until late 2016, when only one Finch remains.

The player controls Edith, the last surviving Finch, as she travels back to her childhood home, the mansion where Finches lived and died for almost a century. Edith, whose (now deceased) mother had taken her away from the house as a child, has returned to find out the truth behind the tragedies that befell her family for as long as they can remember, the stories her mother would never let her hear. When Edith finds clues about the deaths of her deceased relatives, the player plays through the last moments of these relatives' lives.

Characters

Despite the fact that the ensemble cast of *What Remains of Edith Finch* is one of the elements that makes the game so compelling, there are multiple family members who could be considered "secondary" to the main characters, because their individual stories have less of an

impact on the game as whole. As a result, I have elected to give an abridged version of the cast of characters.

- **Edith Finch**

- The player character, at least for most of the game. She's 17 years old, and as of 2016, the last surviving member of the Finch family. Adventurous and curious, she's on a mission to find out the truth behind the family curse and the demises of its victims. Edith is her own full-fledged character, and frequently gives the player insight into what her life was like in the Finch house. She says that she never quite realized how strange her family was growing up, and is a fairly cheerful person, clearly not disconcerted about being in a house filled with so much death. Edith is a kind and empathetic person, and genuinely cared for her mother, brother, and great-grandmother while they were alive. At first, Edith is excited to learn the stories her great-grandmother had always wanted to tell her, but as the game progresses, she begins to think that her mother may have been right to hide them from her.

- **Eddie Finch**

- The matriarch of the Finch family. She lives the longest out of every other Finch, dying at 93. Eddie was a strong believer in the family curse, and wanted the stories about the family curse to be passed down through the generations of Finches. She's described as a jovial and kind person, despite the fact that she has lost all of her children and been alive for almost every death in the Finch family tree. She is extremely attached to the Finch house, and refuses to leave it under any circumstances. She puts a massive amount of effort into memorializing the dead, turning each deceased Finch's room into a shrine dedicated to them upon their death. Eddie was extremely attached to the Finch house, and refused to leave it even when threatened with wildfires. Eddie seems to have reveled in the idea of the family curse, giving multiple newspaper interviews about it as well as leaving curse-related memorabilia around the house.

- **Dawn Finch**

- Edith's mother. She wanted her children to have a normal life, and tried to ignore the family curse as much as possible. When her son Milton disappeared, she made it even more difficult to learn about the family curse, sealing the doors to the rooms Eddie had turned into shrines for the dead. She and Eddie often had arguments about how much her children should be told about the family curse, and an argument with her is one the reasons Dawn leaves the Finch house with Edith. Despite trying to distance herself from the family curse, she herself succumbed to it shortly after leaving with Edith.

- **Lewis Finch**

- Edith's older brother. He lived in the Finch house for his whole life. He was a brilliantly creative man who was going to rehab for substance abuse. Edith says he was a good brother, and they were close when he was alive. He worked in a fish cannery, and was prone to bouts of vivid daydreaming. Eventually, his daydreaming world grew to be so wondrous and all-consuming that he preferred it to the real world, and he commits suicide in order to fully join his fantasies. His death is what spurred his mother to take Edith and leave the house.
- **Molly Finch**
 - Edie's first child and the first victim of the family curse in the Finch house. She was 10 years old, and dies from eating poisonous holly berries after being sent to bed without dinner. Her death is the first that Edith discovers, and introduces the player to the structure of the death scenes in the game. Molly was fearless, choosing to write an entry in her diary while she fully believed a monster was under her bed, instead of crying out for help.
- **The Remaining Finches (Walter, Barbara, Sam, Calvin, Gregory, Gus, and Milton)**
 - Finch family members, all of whom died "before their time". Each were creative, talented people in their own way. Most of them believed in the family curse, and were somewhat irresponsible and reckless as a result.

Breakdown

What Remains of Edith Finch plays like a pop-up storybook, and the game embraces this style. All gameplay elements of *What Remains of Edith Finch* serve as vehicles to tell the story, and piece together into a poignant and cohesive narrative. *What Remains of Edith Finch* aims to leave the player with a story that will last in their minds, and certainly accomplishes that goal. The most important elements of the story are laid bare for all to see, yet other significant details remain ambiguous, left to swirl around in the player's brain long after putting down the controller.

The game opens with an unknown boy on a boat, holding flowers in one hand and a journal in the other. The journal's cover simply reads "Edith Finch", and when the boy opens it, Edith herself begins reading it aloud. The game smoothly transitions into a new environment, where the player controls Edith on the day she wrote the journal. Throughout the game, Edith provides more narration, and it's clear that everything she says is still being read from the journal. The journal is clearly meant for someone specific, but we don't know who that is from the outset, though some hints are present. The journal serves as a clever way to introduce the audience to this world, and the idea that the player will be swapping perspectives for most of the story. Additionally, it introduces the idea that everything that we learn in the game is secondhand. No physically present characters will tell us anything--we have to piece together

clues that we find. As we approach the house, Edith provides some context about her family and what her life was like before leaving the family home. She tells us bits and pieces about her mother, brother, and great-grandmother, as well as how the house never seemed strange to her as a child. Because the journal is being written for an outsider to read, Edith telling us what we need to know to understand the story doesn't feel forced. As a result, the narration feels natural, makes sense, and piques the player's interest. In this opening, we learn some information that is crucial to understanding the game--Edith is the last living Finch, she was close to her family, and she lived in the house until a few days after her brother's funeral.

Edith enters the mansion, on a mission to find out what happened to her deceased family members. Many rooms in the gigantic, twisted house are memorials to the person whom it belonged to when they died. These memorials bear a striking resemblance to ofrendas on Dia De Los Muertos, another way of remembering and honoring the dead. Both types of memorials have a picture of the person as their centerpiece, with things that the person enjoyed in life surrounding it. However, the Finch memorials have a major, dark difference from ofrendas--their centerpieces are documents or some sort of indication of how the person in question died. When Edith examines the elements that reveal the circumstances of a family member's demise, the player plays through the last moments of the person's life, usually in a stylized way.

The player only knows as much as the documents reveal about how the family member died, so it makes sense that each death would be veiled in some level of abstraction. For example, the first death Edith encounters is that of Molly, a 10 year old girl. All that is left of Molly is her diary, which she wrote an entry in right before her death. Molly's entry states that she was sent to bed without dinner, and was so hungry that she eats everything in her room. Then the story gets fantastical, as she shapeshifts into several predatory animals to hunt and eat more--a cat, an owl, a shark, and finally, a monster. The monster eats some hapless humans, then hides under Molly's bed, about to eat her next. Molly doesn't seem very frightened, accepting that the monster "needs to feed" and how she will be "delicious." That's where the scene ends. Of course, it's highly unlikely that Molly actually shapeshifted and was eaten by a monster, given the fact that there has been no previous mention of the supernatural existing in this universe aside from the family curse. However, despite the fact that shapeshifting did not occur, the player experiences it, since that's all that we know about how Molly died. Through some deduction, the player can put the pieces together and find the true cause of Molly's death. While eating everything in her room, the player may notice that Molly ate poisonous holly berries, and her diary entry about transforming was likely the result of hallucinations brought on by toxins. In the night, she succumbed to the poison, but not before writing her diary entry. Each death is hidden behind some layer of abstraction and ambiguity like Molly's--a clever tactic to keep the deaths from being too real and disturbing, while also representing how little Edith herself knows about each death.

Edith navigates the house, piecing together bit by bit how her family tree has withered and died. The deaths seem to be shown in no particular order, as they are not chronological, and

the memorial rooms are scattered far and wide across the mansion. However, the order in which Edith discovers the death scenes has been arranged so that tension can be built to the maximum effect. We know from the opening that Edith lived in the house with three people who have since passed: her brother Lewis, her great-grandmother Edie, and her mother Dawn. The deaths are ordered in the optimal way for building tension, with Lewis, Edie, and Dawn's as the last. Throughout the game, the player is working their way closer and closer to deaths Edith is more immediately impacted by, moving from her great-aunt, to her grandfather, to her uncles, until finally landing on her immediate family. This arrangement of deaths is an excellent way of building tension. The player gets more nervous (and twistedly excited) at the thought of learning what happened to the members of Edith's immediate family, and each death is an opportunity to put together another piece of the puzzle. Each death sequence is so unique and interesting that you feel a burning need to learn more, but with some trepidation--while done in a fun and interesting way, each death is still a death, and carries emotional weight. Meanwhile, as tension rises for the player, so it does for Edith herself. At the beginning of the narrative, Edith is nervous, yet excited to learn all of the stories about family members she had never been allowed to hear. However, as she continues, Edith loses confidence about reliving her family members' deaths. She starts to wonder if coming back was a mistake, and if "we started to believe in the curse so much that it became real". Additionally, Edith relates the deaths back to her own life more and more as discovering the deaths continues, and says at points that she wished that she had been told some of the stories closer to her.

Finally, Edith reaches the top of the twisting, giant house, and discovers the cause of her brother Lewis's death, the death that resulted in her departure from the house. From Edith's narration, we can tell that she and Lewis were close, and, rightfully so, his death sequence is incredibly emotional. After learning about Lewis's death, Edith begins to write an entry in the journal, about her last day at the house, a day that has been alluded to throughout the whole game. Edith flashes back to that day, and we control her younger self in a scene that plays oddly like a death sequence. The day after Lewis's funeral, Dawn insists that they leave the house, begging Edie to come with them. However, Edie refuses to leave behind her house and her memorials. Some of the most powerful lines of the game are spoken during this exchange. Edie tells Dawn that "Edith has a right to know these stories", and Dawn retorts with "My children are dead because of your stories!" This claim seems like a serious case of emotional projecting. After all, Dawn has just lost one of her children, and it seems impossible that stories alone could kill a family. But upon further thought, it makes sense. Almost all of the Finches were prone to seriously irresponsible and reckless behavior, and many of the deaths in the family were due to this behavior. Considering that each Finch grew up thinking they would die young, they didn't take as many precautions as they should have when going about with their lives. When an unknown, potentially dangerous intruder was in the house, Barbara Finch went after him with a crutch as her only weapon, instead of calling the police. When a serious storm was brewing on the beach, Gus Finch insisted on flying his kite outside, and his father Sam didn't stop him. Why

fear or prepare for the worst when you know it will catch up to you before you grow old anyhow? Viewed through this lens, Dawn's anger makes sense--Edie, as the matriarch of this family, has been reinforcing the idea of the curse for her entire life, and, knowingly or unknowingly, has contributed to many of the deaths in the family.

Dawn and Edith move out that night, leaving Edie behind. Edie dies the next day--it's implied that the cause is mixing alcohol with her medication the night before. Despite all the stories she told about the family curse, it seems that she was the only one who was able to escape it, living until 93. For perspective, the next oldest Finch lived to be a little over half that, at 53 years old. Dawn and Edith leave the house, and the rest of the story progresses quickly, with little to no input from the player. Edith says her mother got sick and died shortly after leaving the house, leaving Edith completely alone in the world. Finally, the player discovers that the character reading the journal, the boy on the boat, is Edith's son, and Edith herself died in childbirth, less than a year after writing the journal. The journal is all that her son has left of her--hence, what remains of Edith Finch. The game ends with her son placing the flowers we began the game with on her grave in the family cemetery, where Edith had been buried alongside all of the relatives she learned about. It's abrupt, and barely gives the player any time to unpack all that they've learned. The player is left wanting more, feeling like there should be something else. It mirrors the feeling the player gets from watching the death scenes. You want more, something to show that there is meaning in the suffering. But, like in real tragedy, there is no meaning handed to you. The only meaning you get is what you can make from it.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *What Remains of Edith Finch* is the structure of the death sequences. *What Remains of Edith Finch* faces a difficult challenge in that it needs players to connect with a large cast of characters enough so that their deaths are impactful, all without the player ever meeting said characters in person. By playing as the character in the last moments of their life, the player is forced to empathize with them, because they are quite literally looking through the character's eyes. Additionally, the way that each death sequence is narrated lends to the empathy as well. Each death scene is discovered through a document retelling or implying what happened to the deceased family member, and the document is read as the death sequence happens, similar to Edith's narration during the game being entries in her journal. The documents and the emotion present in their authors adds greatly to the emotional impact of each death sequence. For example, the death of a one-year-old baby is narrated by a father reading a letter to his ex-wife, pleading that the death of the baby was not her fault. The father would have had the closest bond to the child and the most emotional reaction to his death, so it makes sense to have him narrate this baby's section. Meanwhile, Walter Finch, who was isolated for most of his life, writes a letter before leaving the house that unknowingly becomes his eulogy. Being a hermit, he

was the one who could offer the most insight into his life and feelings at the time, providing extra emotional context. The structure of the death scenes makes the player empathize with the character in their last moments, and as a result, gives their death a stronger impact.

Unsuccessful Element

The main unsuccessful element of the game was some of the ambiguity that it lent to certain deaths in the family, specifically the deaths relating to the supernatural. Certain aspects of the ambiguity are excellent and serves to shroud the raw horror that would otherwise be provided by certain deaths. Additionally, the deaths where there is a rational explanation for seemingly supernatural behavior are also well done, as seen in Molly's toxin-induced hallucinations. However, the stylization of certain deaths makes the cause of death so uncertain that the player is lead to believe that the supernatural does indeed exist. For example, Barbara Finch, a child star who was the lead in many monster movies, is implied to have died when monsters invaded the house and tore her apart. Milton Finch, an artistic child, was implied to have found a magic paintbrush and disappeared when he stepped inside one of his own paintings. Both of these deaths insinuate that magic is real, and if magic is real, then it seems likely that the family curse would be real as well. The reason that the idea of the family curse being real is an issue is because the game's story is so much more powerful when one believes that there is no family curse, and that the curse is a way for this family to explain away the suffering and tragedy that has befallen them. If the curse exists, that fact takes away from a large part of the humanity and relatability of the story. It becomes less about how a family deals with the inevitability and tragedy of death, and more about a family trying to fend off a powerful, supernatural force. The strength of the death vignettes is that you're able to relate to the characters. Seeing yourself in the tragedies--most of which are simple accidents that could happen to anyone--is what makes the deaths so impactful. The idea that these deaths were orchestrated by some sort of mystical power beyond anyone's control is much less relatable. The curse is best seen as a scapegoat for the tragic deaths in the family, and anything that insinuates that it could be real weakens the narrative.

Highlight

The highlight of the game is Lewis's death scene. It is the most emotional death, and the most beautifully done. It's the death Edith is most impacted by--her older brother, who she was close to, and whose death caused Dawn to move her and Edith out of the house. Lewis was a recovering drug addict, and the source of his death is discovered through a letter his psychiatrist wrote to his grieving mother upon his death. Lewis worked at a fish cannery, where his job was monotonous and dull. He chopped fish in a metal guillotine for hours on end, and that's how the

player begins--picking up fish and placing them in the guillotine. To pass the time, Lewis began to daydream. This daydreaming is represented by a section of the screen that fades into a different game with a different, third-person player character, one the player must control at the same time as they chop the fish. It begins simply enough, as a maze the player navigates, but as Lewis's daydreams get wilder and wilder, the secondary game gets more and more detailed, and begins to sprawl out farther into the screen. Eventually, his daydreaming is so vivid and expansive that no remnant of Lewis's workstation remains onscreen, save for the fish that occasionally plop down and ruin his magnificent view of the world he's created. The psychiatrist narrates this entire progression, and as the daydream evolves, the tone of the letter, which starts out as fairly clinical, evolves as well. As she continues, the psychiatrist speaks with a mixture of wonder and mounting horror--she knows what the result of this daydream is for Lewis, but still cannot help but get enraptured by Lewis's descriptions of his fantasy world. On the final day of Lewis's life, the scene changes. As opposed to the third-person view of his daydream that Lewis had taken before, the dream is now in first-person view, symbolizing how Lewis has been fully sucked into his fantasy. The psychiatrist says Lewis told her that, to become king of all the lands of Wonder, all he had to do was bend down his head in front of the queen for her to crown him. In front of said queen, where Lewis is meant to bend down his head, is a stylized guillotine. The player has a sickening moment of realization of what Lewis is about to do, but as with the other death scenes, there is nothing to be done. Lewis bends down to be knighted, and, as the psychiatrist states, "the rest I think you know."

Critical Reception

What Remains of Edith Finch received critical acclaim, with a Metacritic rating of 98%¹.

Marty Sliva of IGN gave *What Remains of Edith Finch* an 8.8/10, stating that the game has "one of the finest magical-realism stories in all of video games"². He praises the structure of the death vignettes, and how he was left with a "beautiful mosaic" when he was finished piecing the stories together.

Susan Arendt of Polygon gave *What Remains of Edith Finch* a 9.0/10, praising the detail and creativity put into each story³. Arendt also comments on how the story and deaths are "beautiful in their own sad way", and how it's impressive that a game centralized so much on death has entirely avoided being gruesome or creepy.

Justin Clark of Gamespot gave *What Remains of Edith Finch* a 9/10, calling the game "undeniably powerful", and praising how, even though everything ties together, the player is left to find meaning in the story⁴. Clark continues to state how the game is "friendly in the face of misery" and how its narrative manages to find a sense of beauty and whimsy while constantly under the shadow of death.

At the 2017 Game Awards, *What Remains of Edith Finch* won the award for Best Narrative⁵. *What Remains of Edith Finch* also won the award for Excellence in Narrative at the 2018 SXSW Gaming Awards⁶, and was named the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA)'s Game of the Year in 2017⁷.

Lessons

- **Find common ground between your player and your characters.** It's hard to relate to a character you have nothing in common with. However, when characters are in strange or fantastical situations, it can be hard to find a way to make them relatable. However, *What Remains of Edith Finch* shows that many aspects of a character's life can be different from the player, so long as there is at least one aspect of their life that reminds the player of themselves. In a piece reflecting on *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Julie Muncy from *Wired* wrote that she was able to relate to the character of Edith Finch, because her family house is full of memories that she wanted no part of, much like the Finch mansion⁸. Muncy states that she enjoyed the game much more as a result. I personally was able to see myself in the character of Lewis. I've never worked in a fish cannery, but I'm prone to bouts of daydreaming, so I understood where he was coming from. So, when it came time for Lewis to put his head under the guillotine, I was devastated. When players and characters have common ground, it makes the events of the story seem so much more real, and thus, more impactful.
- **Don't fear the reaper.** Sometimes writers shy away from the idea of permanently killing a character. Death is a frightening concept, and, handled wrong, could result in disappointment or anger from players. *What Remains of Edith Finch* proves that death, used correctly, can make a beautiful and haunting narrative. The levels of abstraction that the deaths are handled with serves to veil the tragedy just enough so the player is not devastated, but still feels the full weight of the death. Additionally, no deaths are "played up" for drama--it can take a while to get to a death in a sequence, but the timing feels natural, not drawn out. Death is a natural thing, and *Edith Finch* proves to us that it's possible to make a narrative where death and all the emotion surrounding it is heartbreaking, yet beautiful.
- **Narration, used cleverly, works well.** Narration can sometimes be seen as unnecessary and boring. It's arguably overused in many games and movies. However, *What Remains of Edith Finch* uses narration in a clever and compelling way. Firstly, most of its narration is diegetic--the death sequences are narrated by authors reading the notes they've written about a character's death, and even Edith's narration throughout the game is her reading aloud her journal. It helps greatly that each narrator is a character, not an

omnipotent, disembodied voice. It gives the narration more of a weight, and feels more like a conversation, as opposed to trivial dispensing of information.

- **Be careful with how you give your information.** *What Remains of Edith Finch* strikes a fine balance between handing the player information and leaving certain details for the player to discover. The key elements of the story are given to the player—this family is plagued by deaths, Edith is the last remaining one, they left after Lewis died—but other elements are left for the player to discover. However, the elements that are left do not detract from the story if not found, meaning that Edith Finch is able to appeal to casual players who would rather not analyze their games. For example, it's a quick, throwaway line that hints at the cause of Edie's death, and from the beginning, the game drops hints about Edith's pregnancy. However, if the player didn't notice either of these things, then the story would still flow well and make sense, if maybe a bit less rich. *What Remains of Edith Finch* tells us that it's okay to leave things for the player to discover, just make sure that the key elements of the story are clear and present.
- **It's okay to leave things up to interpretation, so long as the clues lead somewhere.** Tying into the previous lesson, *What Remains of Edith Finch* excels at leaving certain elements of the story up for interpretation, but implying one or multiple plausible answers to the interpretation. Take the death scene of Walter Finch. Walter lived underneath the Finch house, and was driven to leave by the absence of a routine rumbling that he considered to be a “monster outside the door”. Once Walter leaves, he gets hit by a train. To me, the implication was that the train was the rumbling the whole, but I've heard other equally plausible interpretations, such as the idea that Walter was hallucinating, or that the rumbling was metaphorical and represented his anxiety. What's key is that the writers likely had something in mind for the “real” interpretation and that there IS an answer, not a disembodied rumbling simply because they needed rumbling for the plot. In story heavy games it's important to provide an avenue for at least one answer to be correct, otherwise you've just created many vague strands that may or may not tie together, a narrative mad libs for your player to fill out.

Summation

What Remains of Edith Finch is a beautiful exploration of life and death, and everything that comes with it. In games where the idea of death is prevalent, it can be easy to slip into the realm of horror, and the mindset that a game must inspire an intense fear of death in order for death to resonate with its players. Edith Finch treats death like an old friend, fearing it to a degree, but mainly accepting its consequences with bitter resignation. As Walter so eloquently puts it, “even the monster outside the door starts to seem familiar”. It takes incredible skill to create a narrative about death that is not only effective, but hauntingly beautiful, and for this

reason I believe it was well worth analysis. It's a story that, like much of life, gives the player bits and pieces of meaning, and leaves them to put together the whole picture themselves.

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