

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *What Remains of Edith Finch*

**Platforms:** PC, PS4, XB1, Nintendo Switch

**Genre:** Adventure

**Release Date:** April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Developer:** Giant Sparrow

**Publisher:** Giant Sparrow

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Ian Dallas

## Overview

*What Remains of Edith Finch* is a first-person adventure game in the “walking simulator” style set on Orcus Island off the coast of Washington state. It begins as Christopher Finch takes a ferry to the island and begins reading his mother’s memoirs. His mother’s name is Edith Finch who provides much of the narration as the game progresses through several nested narratives. The stories she tells are of her family and their deaths. The majority of the game takes place in the Finch family home: a sprawling estate with each room dedicated to another dead family member. As the story progresses, the player learns the fate of each family member, playing as Edith Finch exploring the house.

I played *What Remains of Edith Finch* as part of a “book” club. The club had just finished reading Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and our natural reaction was to compare the two works. What followed was an intense discussion about how these types of media differ both in the specifics of their themes as well as the execution of their narrative. Throughout this review I would like to discuss the two works in a similar way, with the majority of the focus on *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

*The Remains of the Day* explores a similar theme of the dangers of self-narrative. It is written as the memoirs of a butler named Mr. Stevens as he contrasts his previous career serving a British lord named Lord Darlington with his current employer. The reader follows the character as he explores the ideas of dignity, service, and purpose in one’s life. The slow reveal that Lord Darlington became a pawn for the Nazis before World War Two culminates in Mr. Stevens being

forced to conclude that his dedication to the idea of becoming the perfect butler has caused him to waste his life.

Both *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *The Remains of the Day* tell about the dangers of self-narrative. Critically, they differ in their final message with *The Remains of the Day* telling a cautionary tale of a wasted life based on this narrative while *What Remains of Edith Finch* ends more ambiguously, allowing the player to decide for themselves whether or not these narratives are truly dangerous.

## Characters

### *What Remains of Edith Finch* Characters:

- **Edith Finch** – Throughout most of the game, the player plays as Edith Finch, one of the youngest in the family of Finches as she explores her ancestral home. Near the beginning of the game, we learn that Edith has inherited a key from her mother which unlocks something in the family home. She moves throughout the house describing the memorials of her dead relatives that have been preserved in their bedrooms. Each description comes with a vignette of their death played by the player. She comes to question the importance of her family's stories of the "Finch Curse" and even to wonder if they are dangerous. At the end of the game, it is revealed that Edith has died and left her memoirs to her son, Christopher. The implication is that she died giving birth to him.
- **Odin** -- The "original" Finch along with his wife Ingeborg. He attempted to escape the Finch curse by sailing to America from Norway on a boat carrying his entire house. He died when the boat and the old house sank just off the coast of his final destination, Orcus Island.
- **Edie** -- Edith Finch's great grandmother and daughter of Odin Finch. Edie is a critically important figure in the story of Edith Finch. She is the one who sealed off each dead family member's room. She is also the one who tells and retells the stories of the Finch deaths to the children. She was the designer of the family graveyard which was built before the new house was even constructed. Additionally, she may also be directly responsible for the death of her daughter, Molly. Her story is one of the last of the nested vignettes near the end of the game.
- **Walter** -- Edith's maternal great uncle. Though details are unclear, Walter Finch seems to have been traumatized by the death of his sister, Barbara Finch. He spent most of his life in an underground bunker beneath the Finch house. He is the "Mole Man" newspapers found around the house speak about: a story that Edie popularized. Every day he would eat a can of peaches at noon and hear a loud knocking and rattling coming from outside. He wrote about these disturbances as a "monster" at his door, but they were in fact a nearby train passing through a tunnel. He is killed when he finally leaves his bunker to

walk on the train tracks and is hit by the train. After this vignette, Edith speaks about the possible danger of her family's stories.

- **Sam** -- Edith's maternal grandfather. He enlisted in the military at eighteen, several years after the death of his brother, Calvin, who he shared a room with growing up. He was a serious man who was killed during a hunting accident with Edith's mother, Dawn.
- **Calvin** -- Edith's maternal great-uncle. He was killed on a swing set by swinging too high and flying off of a cliff. His death deeply affected his brother, Sam.
- **Barbara** -- Edith's maternal great aunt. Barbara was a child star in horror movies and famous for her trademark scream. The details of her death are unclear as its story is told in the form of a comic book that Edie likely commissioned and had placed in her room. It seems likely that she was killed by her boyfriend who disappeared after her death.
- **Molly** -- Edith's maternal great aunt. Her vignette is told through a final entry in her diary. She describes being sent to bed by her mother, Edie, without dinner. She was so hungry, she began eating everything she could find including toothpaste and mistletoe berries, which are poisonous. This is likely what caused her death, though the writing in her diary speaks of a monster that has snuck under her bed to eat her.
- **Gregory** -- Edith's maternal uncle. Gregory is the youngest death depicted in the game. A message attached to divorce papers heavily implies that Gregory drowned in the bathtub while his mother, Kay, was on the phone. Some critics have called this death the most disturbing as it is represented as a happy occurrence during play, with the child's bathtub toys swimming in sync to Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers."
- **Gus** -- Edith's maternal uncle. Gus's story is told in the form of a poem written by Edith's mother, Dawn. We learn that Gus was upset during his father's remarriage and was flying a kite during the wedding when a storm came. The implication is that this storm toppled a statue on him, causing his death.
- **Dawn** -- Edith's mother. Dawn spent time building houses in India during her youth, meeting Edith's father Sanjay. After Sanjay's death, Dawn moved back into the Finch house. She homeschooled her children, Edith, Lewis, and Milton and wrote a book about teaching. Edith describes her as intense and not much of an optimist. After the disappearance of Milton and Lewis's suicide, Dawn is the first to rebel against Edie's stories. She chose to take Edith away from the Finch house, even physically tearing Edie's storybook in half. She appears to die from a recurrent illness some time after leaving.
- **Milton** -- One of Edith's two brothers. Edie builds him a small "castle" on top of the Finch house. Milton was absorbed by painting and art. The story of his disappearance is told in the form of a flipbook depicting Milton painting a doorway on a canvas and stepping through it. The player can find newspapers around the Finch house that have headlines about searching for the missing boy. Milton is never found, though his mother Dawn never gives up the search and builds him a memorial in the family graveyard instead of a tombstone.

- **Lewis** -- One of Edith's two brothers. His room is near the top of the house, the space fashioned out of an old boat. His living quarters are depicted as a "stoner" den with images of marijuana leaves and psychedelic patterns. His story is the most critically acclaimed of the vignettes. It is told through a letter written by Lewis's psychologist detailing his employment at a local salmon cannery. His psychologist describes his slow detachment from reality, the imaginary kingdom he creates slowly overwhelming the realities of his daily life. He kills himself by placing his head under the machine which cuts the heads off of fish.
- **Christopher** -- Edith's son and only child. He is the first and last character the player encounters. He is the one reading Edith Finch's memoirs, beginning the nested story structure of the game. He is also shown placing flowers on Edith Finch's grave at the end of the game. Notably, he is depicted as having a cast on his arm.

***What Remains of Edith Finch* Characters:**

- **Lord Darlington** – Mr. Stevens' employer throughout most of his recollections. He is the "great man" that Mr. Stevens aspires to serve. Throughout the story, the reader learns of Lord Darlington's slow descent into a supporter of facism, antisemitism, and pawn for the Nazis. He dies in disgrace, post mortems written about him describe him as a fool and amateur who was taken in by these forces. As Mr. Stevens' greatest aspiration is that he become a "great" butler and he partially defines this as serving a "great man," Mr. Stevens spends much of the novel defending Lord Darlington. One of the reasons Mr. Stevens concludes at the end of the novel that he has wasted his life, is that he finally concedes that Lord Darlington was not a great man.
- **Mr. Stevens** – The main character and first-person narrator of *The Remains of the Day*. He is the butler in charge of the staff of Darlington Hall in service to Mr. Faraday, an American gentleman. He tells his story through his memoirs during which he reexamines many aspects of his life. Most of the time he recounts was spent as butler to the previous owner of Darlington Hall, the British gentleman named Lord Darlington. A recent letter from the former housekeeper, Ms. Kenton, prompts him to begin this reexamination as he is forced to consider why she left and if he can convince her to come back.
- **Ms. Kenton** – The housekeeper of Darlington Hall. She is a highly qualified employee and is in charge of all female staff. She is the one who sends a letter to Mr. Stevens about her failing marriage and suggests that she may be nostalgic for their time together. This letter prompts Mr. Stevens to begin his journey to meet her and the writing of his memoirs. She provides a contrast to Mr. Stevens in that she is also driven to perform her duties to a high standard, but willing to abandon this narrative of "perfect service" to pursue other aspects of her life. She also works in the story to strain the narrator's attempts to conceal the true nature of events.

## Breakdown

*What Remains of Edith Finch*'s story is a metanarrative examining the purpose and risks associated with applying narratives to one's own experiences. There are many meta-commentaries on the positive aspects of narrative and how they can uplift, transport, improve, or expand the horizons of readers/players. *What Remains of Edith Finch* seeks instead to explore the danger of these narratives when they are used as excuses for poor decisions, justification for risky behavior, or to subvert the normal healing and grieving processes.

As the narratives are nested into one another, each story telling the stories inside it, so too are the gameplay experiences. The premise is that the boy Christopher is reading Edith's memoirs, but the majority of the story is told from Edith's perspective. She wanders the house in a linear manner exploring the rooms of her dead family members. Each room has been sealed and preserved by her grandmother, Edie. Their contents seem frozen in time, acting as both memorials and harbingers of the Finch family curse.

The Finch curse is an idea that Edie perpetuates, passing it down from generation to generation as an explanation for the many unusual deaths in the family. Each death is told in one of thirteen vignettes that Edith encounters as she explores these preserved rooms.

There are two main interpretations of *What Remains of Edith Finch*'s ending. First, that the Finch curse is real and that the early deaths of each of Edith's family members is due to never outrunning the Finch curse even by fleeing from Norway to America. Second, that Edie has perpetuated the idea of the Finch curse because it absolves her and her family's reckless lifestyles, allowing her to avoid responsibility for any of these deaths. Determining which interpretation is correct is important to the message of the story because if the curse is real, then it is not necessarily true that these family/self-narratives are dangerous. If the curse is not real, then the implication is that these stories caused the death of every member of the Finch family.

There is evidence that supports the idea of a real Finch curse throughout the game. The number of Finches that die young is astoundingly high; that in itself is unusual, but not evidence necessarily of a curse. Christopher, the starting character who acts as a frame around the nested narratives has a broken arm, implying a reckless or dangerous lifestyle that could cause an early death. Lastly, there is a light, general gothic theme throughout the game, especially related to the older generation of Finches. Odin, the original Finch patriarch who decided to try to outrun the curse by fleeing Norway, did so by sailing his house across the ocean. This detail shifts the genre of *What Remains of Edith Finch* towards magical realism, allowing room for fantasies like family curses to occur in the canon.

However, it seems clear that there is more evidence against the idea that *What Remains of Edith Finch* depicts a "real" family curse. Each of the deaths of Edith's family occur during reckless actions or at least, understandable ones. Molly dies after eating poisonous berries, Lewis, a troubled teen with a substance abuse problem commits suicide, Walter is hit by a train while walking on railroad tracks, etc. Deaths such as Barbara's, most likely a victim of domestic violence, or Dawn dying from a recurrent illness are not the results of recklessness, but are unfortunately common events that are not necessarily indicative of a curse.

The deciding factor between these two interpretations is the story of Lewis. He becomes a worker at a local cannery, avoiding the drudgery of his daily life by creating elaborate, detailed fantasies in his mind while he works. Eventually, he comes to despise his real life and attempts to escape into his fantasy by killing himself. This is clearly a depiction of the game's theme in microcosm: that fantasy and self deception are not treatments for life's mistakes, but instead cause further harm by subverting the normal process of learning from mistakes.

During the final portion of the game directly before Edie's vignette about visiting the old house, Dawn and Edie argue. They outline both interpretations of the narrative in the lines, "That thing you're afraid of isn't going to end when you leave the house! Edith has a right to know these stories!" (Edie)

"My children are dead because of your stories!" (Dawn)

The player must then decide between these two interpretations of the game they just played. The key to deciding between these two interpretations is to examine the validity of the stories themselves. Examine the story of Calvin, Edith's maternal great uncle who died flying off his swing set and off a cliff as an example. It was reckless of the family to build a swingset on a cliff, reckless for them to allow Calvin to swing on it, and reckless to let him do it on such a windy day. His family is partially responsible for his death. However, in the version of events written by Calvin's brother Sam and preserved in Calvin's memorial by Edie, Calvin died achieving his life's goal of "flying." In this version, no one is at fault. If anything, it is a happy story about Calvin achieving the impossible. This is blatantly a justification after-the-fact. All of the stories Edie has preserved follow this pattern of reframing death as positive occurrences, or at the very least unavoidable.

It is interesting to contrast these ideas with the final message of *The Remains of the Day*. In Ishiguro's novel, the main character Mr. Stevens finds himself trapped by his self-narrative, even past the point of acknowledging its falsity and harm.

Mr. Stevens is an English butler for an American gentleman, Mr. Faraday. Mr. Stevens receives a message from a previous coworker named Ms. Kenton, prompting him to travel cross-country in an attempt to hire her back. These events cause him to reexamine his time with his previous employer, a British gentleman named Lord Darlington at Darlington Hall. Throughout the story, he examines the ideas of dignity and service. He defines a great butler as one who has dignity even in the face of adversity and, critically, someone in service to a great man. It is clear through his writing that he is striving to become this "great butler" throughout his time serving Lord Darlington. This is the self-narrative that he defines for himself: he is a great butler because he serves a great man and preserves his dignity and professionalism in all circumstances regardless of adversity.

Slowly, bleak details about Lord Darlington become clear. At first, Mr. Stevens defends Lord Darlington, both according to a sense of duty but also in defense of himself. After all, he can never define himself as a great butler if Lord Darlington is proven not to be a great man according to his own definition. Near the end of the book, a minor character reveals that Lord Darlington has become a pawn for Hitler and part of the Nazi party's infiltration of the British

elite. After the war, the situation becomes even more dire as Lord Darlington attempts to defend his actions in a public setting, forever ruining his reputation and that of his household. He died considered at best a fool and at worst a traitor to his country.

To Mr. Stevens, this prevents him from ever achieving his goal of becoming a great butler, a status he pursued to the detriment of all other aspects of his life. He acknowledges that his life has been a waste, a life of total service to a man who did not deserve it. He has lost any chance of a life with Ms. Kenton as she has moved away and married. He can never again become a great butler to a new lord because he finds that he does not have “a great deal more left to give.” Despite this, he decides to try anyway in service to his new employer, Mr. Faraday. He does this even though he knows he will fail and waste the remains of his life. He is defeated by his own self-narrative and unable to break free.

*What Remains of Edith Finch* tells that these narratives are dangerous because they can be used after-the-fact to justify dangerous behavior and prevent learning from mistakes. *The Remains of the Day* demonstrates how these narratives can be harmful throughout life, standing in the way of happiness or fulfillment. Combined, they provide a complete picture of the dangers of self-narrative

## **Strongest Element**

*What Remains of Edith Finch*'s best trick is how it accurately depicts the allure of this type of deceptive self-narrative. Imagine if the confrontation between Dawn and Edie occurred earlier in the story, outlining the struggle between the comfort of a safe narrative and the need to learn and improve when confronted by the brutal truth. The player would automatically side with Dawn, believing that these stories Edie tells of her children's deaths are just justification for recklessness and fetishization of misfortune. It would break the illusions that these narratives are tragic but unavoidable, like a family curse.

Instead, the player feels drawn towards these false narratives, which ignore mistakes instead of fixing them. They are dissociations from tragedy that absolves the guilty of their transgressions. They are the quiet shrugs that says “there's nothing we could have done.” Indeed many reviewers report feeling love and sadness at the deaths of the Finches, but rarely anger at the character, Edie, who perpetuates the narratives that cause them. It is the game's ability to draw the player towards this dangerous reaction that is its most subtle and masterful accomplishment.

The illusion lasts until Lewis's story, when the player is explicitly confronted with a young man who kills himself over the visions in his false narrative. No longer can the player pretend that the Finches' stories are harmless as in this case there is no gap between a story being told and the death of a Finch.

This is the game's most successful element; it lets the player see both sides of the issue around self deception and false narrative before providing any judgement. The result is a stronger argument for the case that these narratives are detrimental.

In many ways Lewis's story is the one that most closely mirrors the story of Mr. Stevens. Both are unable to face life without a false self-narrative, their adherence to which causes even greater damage in the process. However the key difference between the two is that while Mr. Stevens confronts the falsity of this narrative and tragically continues regardless, Lewis succumbs before reaching that point, seemingly with no chance at redemption.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

At times, *What Remains of Edith Finch* highlights the important difference that interaction can make in a story. At others, its interactive elements seem artificial or irrelevant to the telling of the story. Sam's vignette of a hunting accident is a low point in terms of player interaction. The player's view is through a camera taken on the trip and must take pictures of certain parts of the surroundings before moving on with the story. Most of it is told from the perspective of a young Dawn, who will grow to become Edith's mother. The outdoor environment is bland compared to the richness of the Finch house and it is easy to become stuck, unsure of what to photograph to move onto the next scene. The final part of this vignette is clunky, the player controlling Sam himself as he walks up a hill towards a buck that his daughter shot. The sequence is difficult on a keyboard with Sam's model running into obstacles and turning in circles, breaking the somber feeling of the scene as the girl cries over the corpse of the buck in the background.

Beyond just its interactivity problems, this sequence is also one of the less impactful stories because of an inelegant clash between the game's dark and playful tones. When Sam walks up to the buck, Dawn warns him that it's still moving. Regardless, he crouches next to it. The buck throws its horns, pushing Sam off the edge of the nearby cliff. The camera takes a picture at this exact moment, freezing the image of Sam plummeting to his death. This is too silly a sequence for what is supposed to be a moment when Edith connects with the struggles of her mother's childhood.

## **Highlight**

The story of Lewis begins when the player, as Edith, climbs through the window of his room. The room is constructed out of an old speed boat and seemingly pinned high atop the Finch house. It is the room of a stoner, with marijuana paraphernalia and psychedelic imagery. His story is told through a letter written by Lewis's psychologist to the Finches after he has killed himself.

Lewis has a substance abuse problem. His mother, Dawn, gets him a job at the local cannery in an effort to direct him towards more constructive activity. Lewis seems to hate his new job, his only task the repetitive beheading of salmon as they slide across his tray.

Throughout the entire sequence, the player is presented with new salmon semi-randomly so that they cannot develop a pattern to the chopping. His imaginations begin as a simple 2D character in a maze with basic images and text that takes up a small portion of the screen. As his imaginations expand, so does their portion of the screen space.

The player controls Lewis's imagination game with their left hand while they continue to slice the heads off of salmon with their right. The game progresses, turning into a 3D, top-down game of Lewis exploring a small town of faceless citizens. They follow him, cheering for him and playing music. The left-handed imagination controls become more difficult, especially as the player needs to continue cutting off the heads of salmon. The next fantasy is of Lewis on a boat conquering kingdoms, dubbing them with variations of his own name like "Minneapolis."

Finally, the imagination game turns into a third-person, 3D game and takes up the entire screen. Lewis's bloody glove and the occasional salmon are still visible however, but seem a distraction from the magnificent images of Lewis's imagination. Finally, the fish and the glove disappear when Lewis is crowned king over "all the lands of Wonder." In reality, he has placed his head beneath the salmon-chopper and killed himself.

Lewis Finch's story is the highlight of the game because it embodies the essence of the story as a whole. His descent into his own imagination and resulting death are the "twist" that reveal the true message of the game. Where before the player and Edie are fully capable of softening the tragedy of each death by couching them within whimsical tales of misfortune, afterwards the player must confront the fact that they were simply lies told in order to avoid the pain of grief or personal responsibility.

## Critical Reception

- **RockPaperShotgun – Adam Smith – Recommended** – "Edith Finch doesn't just do magical realism beautifully, it makes me think games, rather than literature or film, are the genre's most natural home." Smith's review emphasizes the idea of games as an "engine[s] for empathy" and speaks about the masterful portrayal of each nested narrative. What he finds most appealing is the game's ability to sit besides other works in the genre of magical realism such as *Dover Beach* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. He credits the game's bold choice to avoid all meta-humor or breaking of the fourth wall like so many other narrative games do. In other words, it "earned every tear, every laugh, and every moment of joy."
- **Polygon – Susan Arendt – 9.0/10** – Again, this review emphasizes that *What Remains of Edith Finch* earns the audience's reaction instead of manipulating it. The emotional impact is due to careful writing which focuses on the "crushingly ordinary" instead of the overwrought horror of death. She makes a distinction between the sadness interweaved with love that is prevalent throughout the game from the cheaper feeling of grief many games elicit simply by killing characters. Ultimately, Arendt believes that this distinction

along with the genuine care for each of the individual characters is what makes this a great game.

- **IGN – Marty Sliva – 8.8/10** – This reviewer expresses sentiments similar to Arendt in that the greatness of *What Remains of Edith Finch* is its ability to tell a story about so many deaths without straying into the horrifying or morose. For a game about so much death, “it’s wonderful how full of life each and every tale is.” The reviewer sees this contrast as the central accomplishment of the game.

## Lessons

- **Use contrast to create realism.** *What Remains of Edith Finch* is not a realistic story. The sprawling upper levels of the rickety mansion evoke a gothic manor and the story of Odin riding his house across the sea edge towards a folk tale. Despite this, the game must create a sense of realism to ground its characters and make the player identify with their struggles. *What Remains of Edith Finch* does this by creating contrast between life and death, sadness and happiness, and discovery and forgetting. Real life is complicated, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* evokes reality with this contrast rather than by mimicking it. It does what so much excellent fiction does well: it uses realism to elicit a genuine reaction in the reader/player while using its fiction to sharpen the story’s themes.
- **Embrace different types of storytelling.** Stories have been told for thousands of years by every culture that has ever existed. Traditional novels, film, and game narratives are only the latest forms and not necessarily the best for every situation. Sometimes, like in telling Gus’s story, the best way to display anger and stubbornness is through a poem. The best way to tell of a little girl like Molly slowly being poisoned by the mistletoe berries she ate is to read about her losing herself in dreams, animal forms, and fears of monsters under her bed. *What Remains of Edith Finch* explores many types of stories and this is essential to its success in its narrative, but it is possible for games to go further. It is easy to imagine, with the progress of virtual reality, stories told through ritual or dance for example. Games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* are beginning to explore broader modes of narrative and tell their stories better as a result.
- **Games that are about narrative have to be conscious of the effects of their narrative.** Not every story is worth telling or responsible to tell. Fictional narratives can have real impacts on people. As games become more popular they will face a higher level of scrutiny. This expansion will cause games to affect more people both in positive and negative ways. Games no longer only speak to a niche group, but can have real effects on the behaviors of millions of people. In other words, there is less room to be lazy or disinterested in the ultimate message of a game’s narrative.

## Summation

*What Remains of Edith Finch* is one of the best in its class among narrative games and unique in its mastery of different storytelling techniques. It represents an important step for games, sitting comfortably among great works in other forms of media. Beyond that, it builds upon ideas that are usually reserved for literature and film: grief, dignity, self worth, and the purpose of narrative. I felt that the comparison between *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *The Remains of the Day* was important not only in relation to their narrative themes, but also in how these stories can be successful in their respective forms. *What Remains of Edith Finch* would be an important game even if it failed to explore these ideas in new ways, but it does not fail. It successfully communicates the perils of false narrative and questions the validity of the comfort that they provide.