

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Firewatch
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch
Genre: Adventure/Walking Simulator
Release Date: February 2016
Developer: Campo Santo
Publisher: Panic & Campo Santo
Directors: Olly Moss & Sean Vanaman

Overview

Firewatch follows Henry, the protagonist and player character, through the summer of 1989 as he works as a fire lookout in the Shoshone National Forest, Wyoming. The story begins with Henry making the initial hike to his lookout station whilst a series of text-based flashbacks both inform the player of Henry's backstory, and allow them to partially decide it. In short, Henry's beloved wife, Julia, has developed early-onset dementia, and has gone to Australia to be cared for by her family. Over the course of the summer, Henry bonds with his fellow lookout, Delilah, over a walkie talkie, and the pair investigate and eventually solve a strange mystery involving a former lookout. Henry and Delilah eventually solve the anticlimactic mystery, and are forced to evacuate by an out-of-control wildfire, returning to their "real lives".

Characters

Henry - The player character, Henry is a middle-aged fire lookout in the forests of Wyoming. Originally from Colorado, Henry found the job in a newspaper after his wife developed early-onset dementia, and left to be with family across the world. While his dialogue and personality is often decided by the player's choices, he is generally sarcastic, mildly grumpy, but seems to be a good person. Henry carries deep emotional baggage related to his marriage, and it is implied he has had troubles with alcoholism, including a DUI related to coping with his wife's illness.

Delilah - Delilah is the head fire lookout, and Henry's boss for the summer. She is peppy, funny, also quite sarcastic, and middle-aged as well, implied to be 43 at the time of the game. She has been a fire lookout every summer for the last decade or so, and carries her own baggage and trauma. Delilah is also implied to have issues with alcohol, having been drunk the night Henry arrives at his lookout tower, asking him invasive questions and speaking lewdly about her own life. Delilah also briefly mentions a previous relationship in which she emotionally abandoned her partner after her partner's close family member died, leading to their eventual breakup for which Delilah blames the ex-partner. While Delilah is possibly the second most important character, she is only ever spoken to through the walkie-talkie, and never seen or interacted with physically.

Julia - Julia is Henry's wife, and a college professor who, at the time of the game, is suffering from early-onset dementia and being cared for by family in Australia. Henry and Julia met in a bar in Boulder, Colorado some years ago, in a story told during the prologue. Most information

we know about Julia comes from the prologue, including some highlights and lowlights of her life and marriage. Like Henry and Delilah, Julia may have some issues with alcohol, as shown by a story in which she comes home to Henry late into the night after drinking. Additionally, many of the choices in the dialogue involve drinking with her. Some time into their marriage, Julia's illness begins to appear, and troubles with her job arise. Eventually, her condition worsens, and she is sent home on permanent medical leave, leaving Henry to take care of her. As her condition devolves, and Henry proves incapable of taking care of her, her family comes to take her home to Australia and care for her there.

Ned Goodwin - Ned is a former fire lookout who had been stationed with his young son, Brian, in Henry's lookout a few summers previously. Ned is a Vietnam war veteran with what is implied to be PTSD from the war. While little is ever revealed of Ned's personality, it's shown he is something of a recluse, enjoying outdoor activities such as climbing, hiking, and camping, and often brought his reluctant son along with him. After his son's death, Ned ran away from his post, and lived a secluded life in the woods since then.

Brian Goodwin - Brian was Ned's son, around 10 years old. Ned brought Brian along with him to Two Forks Lookout, where he was stationed for the summer. Despite children not being allowed at lookout towers, Delilah allowed Brian to stay because of their friendship, and they spoke through the walkie talkies much like Henry and Delilah. Brian is a "nerdy" kid, interested in dungeons and dragons, and not particularly enjoying the outdoor activities Ned brings him along to. Ultimately, Brian dies during a climbing accident in a cave in the forest with his father, resulting in his father abandoning his post and sparking the mystery that Firewatch's plot is centered around.

Breakdown

Firewatch is a story about running away from problems. Just about every character in the game is running from something. Henry is running from his wife's illness and his failure to deal with it. Delilah runs from responsibilities in the "real world". Ned runs away from the responsibility of his son's death, and the consequences that might arise from it. The story can be fit into a standard 5-act plot structure.

The first act consists of the initial hike Henry makes out to his station, Two Forks Lookout, during which the story of his marriage with Julia is told in intervals throughout the hike. This time consists of sections of the player hiking through the woods with the parts of the story of Henry's marriage told in text with small choices the player can make. The game opens with the story of Henry and Julia meeting in a bar, and beginning to date. Julia is a college professor, and Henry's occupation is not stated. They move in together, get a dog, discuss having children, and eventually get married. One night Julia comes home four hours late and drunk, causing a fight. Later, their plans for children are waylaid by work. Soon after, Julia experiences the first symptoms of her illness, while at work. After returning to work, her symptoms worsen and she is sent home on permanent medical leave. Henry contemplates putting her in a care facility as he struggles to care for her. Henry begins drinking more, and becomes a regular at a local bar, and is eventually arrested for drunk driving. This causes Julia's family to take her home as Henry proves incapable of caring for her. Soon after, Henry finds the ad for the lookout job in the newspaper, and takes it. The act ends with Henry reaching his tower, and speaking to Delilah over the walkie talkie for the first time.

The second act begins the next day with Henry busting a pair of teenage girls starting fireworks in the woods, and encountering a mysterious man on his return to the lookout, that would later be revealed to be Ned. Henry comes back to his lookout completely trashed, which the player may choose to blame on the girls he scared off, or the mysterious man in the woods. A few days pass off-screen, and the player is greeted in the lookout by Delilah's voice on the walkie talkie, informing him that their communication line was down. Henry goes to investigate it, finding the line cut by tools. Finding the same beer cans that were littered around the teenage girls' camp, Henry goes to investigate their camp, following the smoke plume of a campfire. On the way, he finds a backpack belonging to Brian Goodwin, whom Delilah explains is the son of a previous lookout that disappeared. Upon arriving at the camp, Henry finds it trashed, and a note from the girls blaming him for wrecking their camp. Here we can see a reversal, and the bridge to the third act.

Soon after these events, the teenage girls are reported missing, and Henry and Delilah fear they may be blamed, causing Delilah to falsify a report saying that neither of them had encountered the girls. Many weeks later, a large wildfire appears near Henry's lookout. One night Henry and Delilah talk about the fire, and their lives, with the two eventually expressing attraction for each other, and a sexual conversation is implied to occur off-screen.

The next day, Henry hikes down to the nearby lake, and finds a radio and clipboard containing notes and transcripts of his conversations with Delilah, including the romantic one watching the fire, through the walkie talkie. While reading the clipboard, Henry is knocked unconscious by an unknown assailant, and wakes up to find the clipboard and radio gone. After waking up, Henry hikes to the area of the forest mentioned on the clipboard to find an ominous,

government marked fence blocking the area. Unable to get through, Henry goes to ultimately find a fireax to break in. During his journey to find the ax, Henry and Delilah hear a third person on the radio frequency coughing, and the pair realize they are being listened to. Henry goes back to his tower, and here we can see the reversal leading to the fourth act.

After a day, Henry is greeted by a mysterious call from Delilah telling him to go to a supply cache, where he finds a new radio that they can use to speak freely. Now, able to plan and speak without fear of being heard, Henry and Delilah decide that he should go to the fenced off area and use the ax to break in. Inside the fences, Henry finds wireless communications equipment (rare and expensive in 1989), and what appear to be scientific notes on Henry and Delilah, including their relationship and personal lives. Also in the research station, Henry finds some sort of tracking device that can locate certain signals. Confused and afraid of what they have discovered, Henry and Delilah discuss their next move, and consider burning down the camp, but decide not to. As Henry hikes home, he turns around to discover the camp on fire, and follows the tracking device to a backpack containing a key for the mysterious cave near his lookout. While heading back, Delilah reports seeing someone in Henry's lookout through binoculars, and tells him to hurry back. Upon returning, Henry finds a walkman taped to his door, with a recording of Henry and Delilah discussing burning down the research camp. Looking for any sort of answers, Henry goes to explore the cave. Once inside, he turns to find the door locked behind him, and is forced to continue in and find another exit. Henry eventually finds another exit, and outside it Brian Goodwin's hideout, where notes reveal that Brian would hide from Ned when he tried to teach Brian to climb. At Brian's hideout, Henry finds some climbing equipment, and uses it to descend deeper into the cave, where he finds Brian's

decomposing body at the bottom of a rock wall. Henry tells Delilah about this news, who blames herself for Brian's death, saying that he died because she allowed him to stay with Ned. Henry uses the other exit to leave and hike back to the tower.

The next day, and the beginning of the fifth act, the fire in the area has grown to a dangerous level, and the forest service orders the evacuation of Henry and Delilah. On his way out, Henry finds the tracking device from the research camp beeping. He follows it to a tape from Ned Goodwin, along with a rope up to his hideout. In the tape, Ned explains that he was responsible for everything that had happened to Henry and Delilah, using old radio equipment to spy on them. He swears that Brian's death was accidental, and afterwards he decided there was no point in returning, and left to hide out in the forest. At the end of the tape, Ned says he is going further into the forest, to search for a new home, and asks Henry not to look for him. With the last sentence of the tape, Ned says "Sorry about your wife." Henry climbs the rope up to find Ned's bunker, where he had been living for the past three years. Inside the bunker is an assortment of Brian's old things, radio equipment, radio transcriptions of Henry and Delilah, and a typewriter with drafts of the "research notes" Henry had found at the research camp, which was ultimately just for the study of wildlife. After searching through, Delilah tells Henry that he must go to the evacuation point now, at her lookout tower. She also tells him that the missing girls from earlier that summer have been found and are safe. Henry makes the hike to Delilah's lookout, from which she has already been evacuated. Inside, he uses her radio equipment to speak with her one last time before the helicopter arrives for him. During this conversation, Delilah tells Henry to go visit Julia, saying "You came out [to the forest] to put your memories

behind you, and they're still right there in front of you". The helicopter then arrives, and brings the ending of the game.

The story of Firewatch makes for a wild ride, and unarguably an anticlimactic ending. Henry and Delilah ultimately discover that this grand conspiracy they were uncovering was just the work of an unstable hermit, with no grander meaning. Everything appears to wrap up extremely quickly. However, this bizarre ending adds to the message of Firewatch, hammering home that this is about escapism. If there had been some great conspiracy in the woods, something bigger than just Henry, Delilah, and Ned, the story would no longer be about Henry's struggle with Julia's illness, but just another horror-mystery game. The deep, emotional backstory given to Henry would have had little purpose, serving only as flavor. Instead, Firewatch makes the deliberate choice to solve the mystery anticlimactically. The real story of Firewatch is not the events that happen in the woods, but rather the lives of the characters outside that summer. From the very beginning, no matter your choices in the prologue with Julia, Henry makes mistakes in their relationship, and consistently runs away from or evades responsibility for these errors, never confronting them head on. In one event of the prologue, Julia comes home late after a night of drinking, and no matter what the player chooses, Henry does not have a meaningful conversation with her about it. In Henry's first conversation with Delilah, when he arrives at Two Forks Lookout, he tells her "I came out here for a breath of fresh air and adventure." Henry admits that he came out to the forest to escape his problems. In the end, he has not escaped anything. Henry is literally forced to return home from his adventure in the woods, and he is told by Delilah to go face his responsibilities and be with Julia. The grand conspiracy in the woods has amounted to nothing but an unstable old man trying to protect

himself, and these grand ideas collapse, leaving only Henry and the very same problems he started with. Ned is also attempting to escape, escape the responsibility of his son's death, the repercussions of returning with that news. In his last tape left to Henry, he says "You know, I thought about going back, having to answer questions, and having to get him put in the ground, and I didn't see the point. Don't come looking for me." Referring to Brian, Ned is clearly also escaping the real world and his problems, and continues to do so after the game's ending, telling Henry not to look for him. Even after these 3 years, Ned has not dealt with his problems yet they still exist, as he is so reminded during this summer. Delilah's problems are not as clear-cut, but she too is running from things, in less obvious ways. In the story she told Henry about her past relationship, after her boyfriend's brother died, he dumped her, and unable to face what she had done, she told her sister that the boyfriend had cheated on her, and left soon after to begin her new job as a fire lookout.

The motif of alcohol is almost omnipresent in the game, acting as a physical representation of escapism. Henry drinks as a reaction to Julia's illness during the prologue, "When she goes to sleep you stay up for a few hours. Drinking on the deck. Watching baseball in the summer, college basketball in the winter." The player's only possible choice in regard to this is "Drinking then too." This is followed by Henry becoming a regular at a local bar, and eventually being arrested for DUI, resulting in Julia's family coming to take her. In one of the first events, you find the teenage girls drinking out in the woods, in a more innocuous form of escapism. The player even has the option to take their bottle of liquor for themselves, after which it can be found in the lookout tower. Delilah admits to Henry that she, too, is a heavy drinker. When exploring Ned's hideout in the final act, Henry finds a case of beer. In each of these cases,

the appearance of alcohol is tied to some form of escape, a function it often serves in reality as well.

There are also some parallels between Ned and Henry, and Ned serves as an example of what Henry could become if he continues to run from his problems. Both were faced with a horrible situation regarding their loved one, did not handle it well, and tried to escape from the reality of their lives. For years Ned has forsaken his life, responsibilities, and likely loved ones, and as a result he is a hermit deep in the forest who terrorizes a pair of innocent fire lookouts. While the characters are clearly quite different, the parallels exist and may be meant as a warning, aimed at delivering the moral of the story.

So, Firewatch is a game about people running away from problems. The entire main plot of the game amounts to essentially nothing, and each character is left in the same place or worse than where they were before. The player is hit with the hard reality that whatever they (and Henry) were dreaming up about the grand conspiracy, it's not true, and the only thing left is Henry's real life. This beautiful contrast to most games that are fantastical and adventurous, with grand plots and consequences, makes for a deeply meaningful story.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of Firewatch is undoubtedly its characters. Henry is a realistic, relatable character, with whom many players can at least partially identify. The first act induces strong sadness, and hits hard for those who've experienced similar loss. Most of us do not always deal with our problems perfectly, and we can understand, and empathize with Henry when he tries to

escape from reality. Even just playing video games is a form of escapism for many. We end up feeling for Henry, and desiring a good outcome for this fictional character. Delilah, too, is a charming, relatable character. Her witty jokes and playful sarcasm feel real, and are endearing to the player. She is another complicated person, and when she divulges details of her personal life, it feels like someone is confiding in you, and their friendship feels real. Much of the narrative of Firewatch is told through Henry's dialogue with Delilah, making their characters and relationship of the utmost importance. Without the powerful characters of Firewatch, the story would not have nearly the impact it does. Firewatch is not actually about the story that takes place in-game, it's about the characters, and the stories that take place outside of the game's bounds, and the strength of the characters are essential to the success of Firewatch's message and the enjoyment of its players.

Unsuccessful Element

Many players, and some reviewers would say the anticlimactic ending of Firewatch is its weakest point. However, I believe the anticlimax serves its purpose, and serves it well, forcing the player back to reality. I believe the least successful element of Firewatch is that it is, at heart, a walking simulator. The player is given very little agency, and the choices the player is given have little to no impact on any of the outcomes. Many players may feel railroaded, or unable to identify with the character and story because of this. In a perfect world, Campo Santo would have been able to integrate player agency with the beautiful narrative they have crafted, but as it stands, Firewatch is almost more of a first-person movie than a game that players have any control over. This design may have been a deliberate artistic choice, as players being able to "do

the right thing” and face up to their problems might interfere with the main message of Firewatch.

Highlight

The true highlight of Firewatch, for me, is the midsummer night Henry and Delilah share, watching the new wildfire. The two characters share an intimate moment, and both seem happy, and like their escape from life is successful. The scene builds up the relationship of Henry and Delilah to a new peak, and gives an expectation of more. The fact that this relationship falls apart, and the magic of that night disappears adds to the final message of the game. Eventually, Delilah flakes out, taking an earlier helicopter to avoid meeting Henry, and the two are implied to likely never see each other again. This scene represents the height of their escapism, with the pair forgetting their real worlds and being happy where they are, right before it all comes crashing down in the very next scene.

Critical Reception

Firewatch was generally well received by critics, earning a score of 81 on the review aggregator Metacritic. The review by Colin Campbell of Polygon rates Firewatch an 8.5/10, praising the game for its characters, particularly the way Henry is presented to the player, saying “Cleverly, developer Campo Santo makes sure the player is heavily invested in Henry's character and personality right from the start of the game, demanding a few personal choices on his behalf that transform him from ordinary everyman into someone special,” referring to the options given to

the player during the first act regarding Henry's marriage. Later, Campbell writes "These two characters are written with a conviction and authenticity rarely seen in video games. Neither of them is idealized, not even for a second. Their self-doubts and flaws are carved into the script and into the optional responses. Their ordinariness is what makes them so appealing," eloquently describing the characters of Henry and Delilah. In Ryan McCaffrey of IGN's review of Firewatch, he focuses on the strength of the script and story, saying "In fact, Firewatch's script, unlike most video games, would also make a fantastic novella that's every bit as gripping as the game is. It's tense, scary, and funny – sometimes all within a few minutes of each other." McCaffrey, however, does state that he was not crazy about the ending, feeling that he left the game missing something, and for most of the game he was expecting some sort of moment, reveal of the mystery that simply never came. So critics and players alike are split on the ending of Firewatch, and one will often find debate over whenever the game is discussed.

Lessons

1. A video game story may be about things that do not actually take place in the game at all. Firewatch uses the summer of 1989 to tell a much larger story, of Henry and his life, and Ned, and Delilah, and Julia. That summer is simply a tool, with a beautiful background, that allows Campo Santo to tell a story deeper and more meaningful than a standard mystery.
2. The characters can make the story. Firewatch relies on the strength of its main characters, Henry and Delilah, to have the impact that it does. Without the authentic,

funny, serious, and most of all relatable characters, the story of Firewatch would fall flat. If players didn't care about what happened to Henry, and Julia, then the entire story would eventually mean very little, because the game is about people, not events.

Summation

In summation, Firewatch is truly a unique game. There are few others that build up expectations massively, and tear them down just to tell a different story. Firewatch chooses not to be a grand, fantastical story about a conspiracy deep in the woods, but rather a story of people running away from their problems. It leaves a lasting impression, and almost encourages the player to take action in their real life. This is a game that tells a message, above all else, and for that reason it deserves a deeper look.

Citations

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