

Game Narrative Review

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Genre: Adventure

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Developer: Campo Santo

Publisher: Panic, Campo Santo

Game Writer: Chris Remo, Jake Rodkin, Olly Moss, Sean Vanaman

Overview

Firewatch is a first-person narrative driven adventure game where you, as a man in his forties named Henry, explore the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming as a fire lookout. Although the wilderness was meant to be a safe refuge for when Henry's life began to unravel, a conspired mystery from years ago begins rapidly and dramatically unfolding, causing both Henry and you to question the events that have happened and make dramatic interpersonal choices.

The game places a heavy emphasis on dialogue choices and exploration. Your main, and for a long time, only point of contact with the outside world is Delilah, your supervisor, who is available at all times through a small, handheld radio. Equipt with a compass and map, Firewatch weaves diegetic mechanics, vibrant dialogue choices, and an intriguing, beautiful environment to create a complex, visceral experience of seduction, fear, and escape, and take an intimate look at the human psyche.

Characters

- **Henry** - The main protagonist of Firewatch, Henry is a burly man in his early 40's from Boulder, Colorado. When his marriage becomes dysfunctional after his wife Julia begins developing early-onset dementia, he takes a job as a fire lookout in the wilderness of the Two Forks Lookout to escape his problems. Henry's personality is

largely defined by the player's dialogue choices- he can be considerate, shy, crass, sarcastic, and capable of navigating serious conversations. However, much of his character is also defined in the prologue of the story- players can identify Henry struggles with alcoholism, he loves his wife but feels shame from his inability to take care of her, and he is struggling with feelings of impotence and helplessness.

- **Delilah** - The deuteragonist of *Firewatch* and Henry's 28-year-old supervisor. She manages Henry other lookouts at the Thorofare Lookout, though the player never interacts with them. Henry is almost always in contact with Delilah and can begin a conversation on anything worth reporting to her. Through conversation, one can discover Delilah's preference for sarcastic, dry humor and puns. The relationship that develops between Delilah and Henry feels authentic because you as the player decide what and what not to say to her.¹ She potentially also took this job in order to avoid relationship issues, and may also have a drinking problem. When the mystery progresses, increasing doubt is cast on Delilah, her affiliation with the problem, and how much information she knows. The player has an option to flirt with Delilah or not, which can impact whether Henry has a wedding ring by the end of the game.
- **Julia** - Henry's wife. Through a series of paragraphs in the opening section of the game, the player learns how Henry and Julia met at a bar in Boulder in 1975. They date, get married, discuss having kids, and get a dog together. Julia begins working as a professor at Yale, but begins showing symptoms of early onset dementia. Henry begins taking care of Julia after she is forced to leave her job, but he struggles with alcoholism and gets a DUI. Julia begins living with her parents, and at the start of the game it is unknown her exact condition, though all indications show she is still alive.
- **Brian Goodwin** - Ned Goodwin's son, a twelve year old boy who died in a rock climbing accident in Cave 452 three years before Henry began his job. He enjoys magic the gathering, tabletop games, and fantasy books. He began living near his father at the Two Forks lookout although it was against forest regulation. When you first discover Brian's body at the bottom of Cave 452, he appears to have been murdered as his head is crushed by a small boulder. However, Ned explains that it was a climbing accident where Brian did not sink his anchor properly. Henry and Delilah are antagonized because Ned Goodwin is covering up Brian's death.
- **Ned Goodwin** - The main antagonist of the game and previous lookout at Two Forks. As a war veteran, Ned has a wide set of outdoor skills that he attempted to pass on to Brian. He blames himself for his son's death, and began covering up the incident and retreating deep into the woods as a recluse after watching Brian's accident- an extreme form of escapism. When Henry and Delilah become involved, Ned begins

¹ Source: James, Benjamin. *Firewatch - A Narrative Analysis*. <https://www.onlysp.com/firewatch-narrative-story-analysis/>. OnlySP. 2016.

blackmailing and harassing the two by setting fires, scaring other park-goers, and recording their conversations.

Breakdown

Though the game is broken down into eleven day/night cycles, the story can be broken down into a three act structure, with the prologue giving context to why Henry took the fire lookout job, act one being mainly about exploration and initial hints of mystery, act two being when the mystery begins to unravel and the story takes a dark turn, and act three being the resolution and response to the mystery.

In a prelude to the main story, we learn about Henry's relationship with Julia in a series of paragraphs and text choices. You as the player, begin making lighthearted decisions concerning Henry and Julia, such as going out for drinks, or naming your dog either Bucket or Mayhem. However, things begin to shift from a perfect relationship into a heartbreaking one. In the paragraphs, you begin learning about Julia's decline into dementia and Henry's alcoholism, intercut with interactive scenes of Henry trekking through the woods to his lookout- the sequence suggesting Henry is lost in thought about his past and hint at Henry attempting to escape his problems. Past dialogue choices that seemed harmless, like going out for drinks, begin shifting in tone, and we learn how Julia is taken from Henry's care when he gets a DUI. Unable to deal with the shame and trauma of the situation, Henry takes a job as a fire lookout in the wilderness. This sequence not only sets up Henry's background, but allows the player to feel a sense of responsibility for his actions.

In the first act, Henry meets Delilah and is introduced to his job of looking out for smoke and keeping the wilderness safe. With a map and compass, Henry explores the Wyoming wilderness beyond his lookout tower and run errands at Delilah's instruction. Henry confiscates illegal fireworks from two beer-guzzling, skinny-dipping teenagers. The teens are pissed and the interaction is comical. To the players discretion, Henry can throw their jukebox in the lake, pissing the teens off. As a storm brews, Henry inspects the locked entrance of Cave 492 on his way back to the lookout, and runs into a dark figure that Delilah says is harmless. When Henry returns to his base, he finds it completely ransacked and his personal items burglarized.

The next day, Delilah has Henry investigate a malfunctioning telephone wire. He and Delilah discover the teens did this. Delilah frustrated and angry about the situation, tells Henry to go find them. Henry follows their breadcrumb trail of beer cans and encounters a backpack that

belonged to Brian Goodwin hanging from a tree. Delilah explains Brian is the son of the previous lookout, Ned Goodwin, the previous lookout who suddenly left his job three years prior. She states Ned is an army veteran and was a terrible father for letting his son stay at the lookout against forest regulations. Henry finally finds the girl's camp, only to discover it ripped to shreds with a note blaming Henry for harassment and for stealing their underwear. He returns to his base, confused about the situation. He boards up his window and a few days later, learns from Delilah the teens have been reported missing, and Henry may have been the last one to see them.

Henry moves on with his daily responsibilities, with Delilah instructing him to pick up materials from a supply drop. At night, a sleepy Henry calls Delilah, believing her to be Julia. Gradually, Henry and Delilah begin developing a close relationship despite their physical distance, one that feels natural and personal because the player has been deciding what to say to her. Act one mainly serves as the setup of Henry's responsibilities and build up of his relationship with Delilah.

Act two is where three concurrent storylines begin to manifest and shift, making the story feel like a murder mystery, paranormal-laced thriller. A fire breaks out near Wapiti Station after Henry discovers a notepad containing all the conversations he's had with Delilah over the radio. The teens are missing and it seems Delilah and Henry covered up their involvement. Henry encounters wild animals with tracking collars on their necks and discovers an active government research facility that seems to be intercepting their radio.

Henry begins to question his reality, worrying he is experiencing his wife's dementia. Fear and confusion strain Henry and Delilah's relationship. They make efforts to use a new untapped radio and make a plan to investigate their stalker. Henry eventually breaks into the research facility to discover a soil grid and a strange tracking device in a tent, as well as psychological descriptions and analyses of Delilah and Henry. Delilah panics and asks Henry to, "Burn this place down!" Henry considers it but objects, but when he leaves sees the camp has been set ablaze. The same night, the tracker goes off. Henry finds an alarmed backpack with the key to Cave 492. When he returns to the lookout, he finds a cassette tape and player taped to his door, containing the recording of Delilah and Henry discussing burning the camp, making it seem like they were the ones who did it.

Henry makes his way to Cave 492, but unnervingly when he enters he is locked in from the outside. He travels through the cave to find Brian Goodwin's camp, a place he used to get away from his father. Here the player can uncover more about Brian's personality, such as his love for tabletop roleplaying games and his empathetic character.

Henry makes his way back into the cave, which begins the start of Act three; the resolution to all the concurrent mysteries. Henry finds a corpse at the bottom of a large pile of rocks. Upon closer inspection, he realizes that it is Brian Goodwin's dead body. Shocked and saddened by this reveal, Henry reports to Delilah his discovery. Delilah blames herself for Brian's death, stating she should have reported Ned Goodwin for allowing his son to live at the lookout.

Soon after, the fire at the research camp and the Wapiti Station fire merge, and Henry as well as everyone in Two Forks must evacuate. On his way to the helicopter pick up, Henry acquires a signal from the research station tracker. Following it, he finds a rope leading up to Ned Goodwin's camp, as well as a tape from Ned. As Henry explores Ned's camp, Ned explains how Brian died in a climbing accident after he did not sink his anchor properly. Henry finds evidence of Ned's involvement with the teen's camp, blackmailing him and Delilah, as well as falsifying the items found at the research facility, all while Ned explains how he was so ridden with guilt over his son's death that he receded further into the woods as a recluse, and this was the reason he began covering up Brian's death.

Henry explains his findings to Delilah, and makes his way to her lookout hoping to meet her in person. However, when he reaches her lookout she is nowhere to be found. Delilah explains to Henry how she didn't want to meet him in the shadow of a dead boy. She explains where Henry can find the helicopter pick up. Henry enters the chopper, and depending on the player's choices, Henry will either have his wedding ring on or not at the end of the game.

Campo Santo effectively delivers a compelling narrative that makes a commentary on the human condition, improving player immersion through weaving diegetic mechanics, beautiful environments, and a robust dialogue system into the game. By having the player navigate with a compass and map, the player can more easily assume the role of Henry, as well as experience the same joy of reaching a destination that he experiences. The environments, filled with vibrant color palettes, volumetric lighting, and strong silhouettes provide a stylized, yet authentic depiction of the Wyoming wilderness that only add to the wonder and mystery of the story. The dialogue system is filled with compelling, believable conversation between Henry and Delilah. The relationship that develops between them feels real and personal, because the player has decided how to characterize Henry and navigate conversations with Delilah.

By allowing the player to choose Henry's reactions, *Firewatch* additionally gives the player an illusion of choice in the narrative that ensues. However, no matter what the player decides to say or what to explore, it does not change the sad and dark resolution of Act three. Henry will never meet Delilah, Julia's condition will worsen, and Henry will return to Boulder

without resolving his personal issues. (The one exception to this, a secret ending in *Firewatch*. If you wait for about two minutes at the helicopter meant to pick you up at the end of the game, you can see the helicopter leave without you and the screen immediately cuts to black, suggesting Henry decides to die in the fire and never return to his former life.) Despite the lack of influence the player has over the ending of the game, the resolution still feels purposeful and natural- leaving the player to reflect on the events that have happened in the game, and the realistic, crushing ending of the story.

Firewatch critiques the human desire to escape from one's problems. This is evident in the story of Ned Goodwin, who refused to return to society after his son's accident. Unable to confront reality, he divulged into a terrible life of preserving his son's remains to the extremest degrees- blackmailing others, listening in on their conversations, hiding in a cave, threatening others, performing arson and burning down forests. Additionally, Brian would not have died if he was able to leave Two Forks and return to school. The vicinity of Brian's accident to his getaway indicates it could have happened while he was escaping from his father's lookout. All these details along with Henry's own personal problems not being resolved at the end of *Firewatch* point to how the choice to run away from your problems and refuse to confront reality is a wrong one.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game is the unique, realistic dialogue between Henry and Delilah. The game displays cheeky, funny, organic conversation between the two that make the overall experience more compelling. Campo Santo took deliberate efforts to emphasize and connect the dialogue choices the player makes at earlier stages in the game with choices the player will confront later in the game. An example of this can be seen when Henry finds the teenager's clothes and illegal fireworks. The player can choose for Henry to ask if he should "Kick the sh*t out of them or something", which Delilah responds, "No no no no no of course not!" Later, when Henry discovers the cut telephone wire and Delilah becomes extremely frustrated at the teen's actions, she will joke that maybe you should reconsider kicking the sh*t out of them. These little additions to the dialogue greatly add to the immersive qualities the game produces.

Unsuccessful Element

If the player refuses to converse with Delilah in the game, the experience can be extremely sad and bleak. The dialogue between Delilah and Henry is a center point of the gameplay that

greatly adds to the organic and charming feel of the experience. When the player makes a deliberate choice of *inaction*, refusing to respond to questions or report on any findings, it can lead to an entire journey of Delilah's frustrations, anger, and rejection. At points in the game, if the player goes sporadically between choosing to respond and choosing inaction, it can sometimes lead to immersion breaking dialogue. If the player chooses to suddenly stop responding to Delilah before you discover Brian Goodwin's body, you would expect her to panic or freak out about your condition, but she continues casual conversation. If Henry never reports the teenagers that are found, Delilah will still report on what is never revealed to her. Additionally, there are small cases where players can break the realism of the dialogue system. If the player takes a scripted object they find in the cache boxes all the way back to Two Forks, the next day you can still discuss it with Delilah, and she will respond in a way that suggests you are at the cache box despite her knowing you are still at the lookout tower.

However, these little issues are very difficult to account for when creating these types of games, and Campo Santo did make a strong case in providing for the "inaction" experience. If players continuously play without responding to Delilah at all, she will become snarky, angry, and frustrated. Henry will become grumpy and reserved in his scripted, required responses in order to progress the game further. Delilah's conversations will reveal her feelings of vulnerability and awkwardness at the silence- when ignoring all her come-ons during the start of the Wapiti Station fire, she will abruptly end the conversation by stating, "Why don't we both just watch this fire and try to imagine all the old dead things inside."² This gameplay style continues to be compelling, and may uncover more about Delilah's personal struggles and Henry's trauma from his fallen marriage.

Highlight

The art of *Firewatch* perfectly encapsulates the stunning qualities of nature that sometimes leaves many of us speechless, rendered with an ethereal, whimsical quality by graphic artist Olly Moss and environment and lighting artist Jane Ng. Vibrant blue, orange, yellow, and purple color palettes differentiate the game from many AAA games' depiction of nature that feature desaturated, muddled browns and greens, guiding the player to have at times a dreamlike experience with walking the forested paths and steering the player through the whirlwind moments of terror in the game. The game features strong silhouettes and visual design; Henry's watch tower is iconic and memorable in shape and form, and props are stylized and have an attention to detail for the scavenger-like player. *Firewatch's* art, color

² Rankin, Simon. *Ignoring Delilah in Firewatch is Heartbreaking*. <http://indiehaven.com/ignoring-delilah-in-firewatch-is-heartbreaking/> IndieHaven. 2016.

language, and visual design capture the captivating qualities of nature and the beauty of being alone.

Critical Reception

Firewatch has received a resoundingly positive response, holding a 9/10 rating on Steam and an 81% on Metacritic. It was a 2017 Bafta Nominee in six categories and awarded in 2016 the IGN Adventure Game of the Year Award, GDC Best Narrative Award, and PC Gamer's Best Writing Award.

Although some players felt cheated by the shallow conclusion of the game, many understand and appreciate the game's overarching goal as a critique on escapism. David Jenkins from Metro writes, "There are so many problems with the final reveal that we barely know where to start," and explains how the conclusion of the narrative- that it is not the murder mystery it convinces us it is, is disappointing. However, Nathan Ditum from The Guardian states the game "does what it sets out to do- it tells a simple, effective story using its keenly developed sense of location and by binding us to Henry through smart writing and dialogue choices... *Firewatch's* final few minutes provide a rush of revelation and reconciliation that caps a triumphant and involving piece of emotional storytelling."

Chris Kohler from Wired Magazine writes, "This is your next must-play story, another voyage to a place games don't often take us" and explains how Firewatch is a beautiful, emotional gut punch. Ryan Mccaffrey from IGN writes, "Firewatch on the strength of its gripping story, brilliant branching script, wholly convincing voice-acting performances, and stunning art direction is easily one of my favorite and most memorable game experiences of this decade."

Overall, while Firewatch may have some dissenting reviews, the overall reception has been overwhelmingly positive, and rightfully so.

Lessons

If your playable character has baggage, show and don't tell. Many games that have characters that have extensive backstories often times use a method of delivering their background through a long paragraph of text the player must parse their way through. Doing

this makes the player feel more disconnected from the character, and oftentimes players will just skip through this hefty amount of dialogue and miss the key information they need to know to enjoy the narrative of the game. *Firewatch* does something different- it characterizes Henry in an effective way in the prologue of the game. Instead of learning who he is through conversing with Delilah or reading about his character- *Firewatch* has its players make the choices that bring him to who he is today. That way when Henry has dreams about his ill wife, or avoids talking about Julia with Delilah, it feels natural and believable, and does not break game immersion.

Make a character controller that feels like who your main character is. The game does a very good job at making you feel like Henry himself. The character controller doesn't feel like a capsule collider floating through space, the walk and gait have a weighty feel of a 40 year old man's body (in an awesome way.) When Henry uses a rope to make his way down a large incline, the rope snaps and he falls, which would be natural for someone his weight could experience. As Henry climbs up a large rock, he takes a breath before he does it. After he climbs up a large pile of rocks, he breaks a trail closed sign when he makes it to the top. All of these details help further immerse the player in Henry's character and make the experience feel organic.

An attention to detail and environmental storytelling can go a long way. The environments of *Firewatch* have a level of detail and polish that adds to the story and experience of the game. For one, the lookout tower has been built with a level of realism, with plumbing, a water cistern and spigot, gas, and even an outdoor bathroom, that all could be found at a real life lookout tower. Questions that normally could break immersion like, "How does Henry survive if he can't get water?" or "How does he go to the bathroom out here, does he just poop in the bushes?" are answered. Additionally, there is a fantastic element of specificity in the props of the game. In the lookout tower, the player can find gifts of environmental storytelling each day. For example, Henry has a typewriter in his room where many mornings he journals his experience and emotions through the days. If the player reads his journal on the second day, they can find Henry discussing struggling with dreams about "Jules," his wife Julia. A few days later, he has a sleepy phone conversation with Delilah, mistaking her for Julia. Another example is that you can find evidence of Brian Goodwin's previous stay at the lookout in the desks and drawers of Two Forks tower. Players can find a "Two Orcs" fantasy map and a D20 that show evidence not only of Brian's stay, but his love of fantasy and tabletop games.

Subtle dialogue details add realism to the experience. Sean Vanaman spoke about how he and the team added wonderful little details in the dialogue of *Firewatch*. An example he has

given is, when you meet the spooky figure for the first time, if the teens call you a creep in the dialogue choices you've made, Henry will then call the figure a creep to Delilah. Vanaman spoke about how language has an infectious nature and that "words bubble along the surface of our social networks." These key additions to the writing of the game added an effective level of realism to the experience.

Summation

Overall, *Firewatch* was rightfully critically acclaimed. Although some may have had issues with the third act of the story, *Firewatch* does a fantastic job at creating a believable story that is honest to the struggles and disappointments of real life. Through creative environmental storytelling, beautiful art direction, and effective writing, the game provides a visceral and emotional journey for its players. The dialogue and interesting interactions between Henry and Delilah are what truly sells the game.