The Power of Interactive Narrative:

A Review of *What Remains of Edith Finch*

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Title: *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Medium: Video Game

Genre: Walking Simulator/Narrative

Platforms: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch

Developer: Giant Sparrow

Publisher: Annapurna Interactive

Release Year: 2017

Average Price: $20.00

My Overall Rating: 9 / 10

INTRODUCTION

I didn't know what exactly to expect the first time I started playing *What Remains of Edith Finch* back in 2017. From what I had seen on the digital store page where I bought the game, it was a short, strange, story-based experience involving a massive, bizarre-looking house in the woods, so I picked it up out of curiosity. I often buy games of this genre (typically called "walking simulators"), but in my opinion, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is the best game of its kind, by far. For the best experience, I would recommend playing it without knowing anything about it, like I did. But if you want to make sure you'll enjoy it before you buy it, this review will discuss the three core aspects of the game without spoiling any major story points. Spoiling any significant aspect of the game's narrative would be unforgivable; there are plenty of surprises and twists. But for the purposes of this review, I'll talk about the game's premise, its clever framing device, and a few minor story and gameplay details that won't spoil the experience for anyone who might want to try it out. However, regardless of whether or not you read this review, I highly recommend *What Remains of Edith Finch* to just about anyone who enjoys slower, more story-focused games. It's one of my favorite games of all time, and it's a good example of the fact that video games can be an art form. But as much as I'm going to gush about it, I'll also point out its flaws and try to give an objective, critical review.

NOTE: <u>Minor</u> spoilers for *What Remains of Edith Finch* begin below.

Before I can talk about any aspect of the game, I have to explain the game's premise for context, as the gameplay and story are seamlessly interwoven. For most of the game, you play as Edith Finch, a 17-year-old girl visiting her childhood home, which has been unoccupied for

several years. But it's certainly no ordinary house. It sits in a wooded area on Orcas Island, Washington, and it towers over the surrounding trees. The house looks like a strange, chaotic mess, with new sections built on top of the old ones and newer ones built on top of those. The image of the Finch House on the game's digital cover was probably the main thing that drew me to the game at first, and the experience of exploring this massive, mismatched manor lives up to the mystery and excitement that its exterior promises. But you don't just explore the house itself; you also explore the tragic stories of the Finch family members who lived there. The central plot point of the game is the Finch "family curse," which is apparently responsible for claiming the lives of every single Finch except Edith. Regardless of whether it's the fault of a curse or not, every Finch who lived in the house (except for Edith) is now dead, and you play as Edith, who has inherited the now-abandoned house. During the course of the game, she explores the house (just a few years after leaving it) to uncover the family's strange, tragic history. Edith had never been told much about what happened to her family, and now it's the player's job to guide her through the massive house and piece together the stories of the Finches.

I. GAMEPLAY & FRAMING DEVICE

As I mentioned earlier, this game could be considered what's called a "walking simulator." Walking simulators typically put more emphasis on story and atmosphere than gameplay, rarely asking the player to do much more than walk around environments, investigate rooms and objects, read notes and diaries, and maybe solve a puzzle or two. I've always enjoyed most walking simulator games (*The Stanley Parable* is also an all-time favorite of mine) but I can understand why they wouldn't be for everyone. Many walking simulators can be slow and meandering, and the worst of them can be pretentious and overpriced for what they offer.

Although *What Remains of Edith Finch* is technically a walking simulator, it breaks the mold in several ways, holding the player's attention and making clever use of the medium of video games to tell its story.

At the beginning of the game, you play as Edith as she approaches and explores the Finch House, and she can't do much more than walk, look around, and comment on what she sees. Players hoping for exciting, skill-based gameplay are playing the wrong game, but there are plenty of interesting segments where the gameplay mechanics change entirely. Every so often, Edith will find a diary, poem, photograph, or other document lying somewhere in the house, and examining these objects will trigger a flashback and a shift in the gameplay -- in other words, a minigame. The game is essentially a series of these minigames, though calling them "minigames" doesn't really do them justice. Each one is its own story about a particular member of the Finch household, letting the player experience the tale of that person's death firsthand. Edith herself wasn't present for any of these deaths, but the player gets to experience these stories by temporarily playing as the Finches whose mementos you find, shifting your point of view to a different (soon-to-be-dead) character for each story. While this may sound grim, these mini-stories have a bizarre, entertaining, magic realism quality to them, with each one feeling unique and featuring its own different kind of gameplay.

For example, one flashback puts you in the perspective of Calvin Finch, a stubborn young boy on a swing. Another one lets you play as Barbara Finch, a former child star who has a harrowing experience one Halloween night. The gameplay in each of these segments is different, making each story feel distinct from both a mechanical and visual perspective. One story has you taking photographs on a hunting trip, while another puts you in control of a wind-up toy frog, swimming in a bathtub. You don't need too much skill at all to play through these sections, but

some are better than others and a few mechanics can be finnicky and a bit annoying. Very few of

the controls are explicitly made clear to the player, which can make some sections confusing at

first, but if you've played any video games in your life before, most of the mechanics of these

segments will come naturally to you. Most of them are designed to be intuitive. In fact,

experimenting with how you can interact with the story unfolding in front of you is one of the

most enjoyable aspects of the game; you never know what to expect in the next flashback.

II. PACING & GAMEPLAY/NARRATIVE SYNERGY

While every one of these flashback minigames is unique and interesting, some of them

can drag on a bit too long, especially on second and third playthroughs, when you've already

seen them all. Even when you're enjoying every flashback section, the game as a whole can feel

like it's dragging on, but I certainly don't recommend rushing through. I still thinking playing it

from start to finish in one sitting is the best way to experience it, but you might want to take a

short break about halfway through, maybe after Walter's story. It takes me about two to three

hours to play through the whole game at a slow pace, so I'd recommend setting aside an

afternoon to experience it fully. While some mechanics can be finnicky (such as the photo-taking

minigame not always making it clear what you're supposed to be taking a picture of), the

gameplay experience on the whole is smooth, just not too challenging and not quite perfect.

Because of the game's walking simulator nature, there isn't too much to talk about in

terms of the technical gameplay itself, but one aspect I want to praise is the seamless blend of

gameplay and story. I've heard this game described as a book in video game form, and while I

agree, I also think it goes above and beyond the storytelling abilities of a book, at least in some

respects. Obviously, a short game like this can't compare to a full-fledged novel in terms of length and depth, but *What Remains of Edith Finch* uses a very unique and clever form of storytelling framing that you can really only experience in a game. Instead of just reading or hearing about the Finches, you see and play through their lives, inner thoughts, and last moments, interacting with the story and participating, rather than just observing. In one brilliant sequence near the end (they saved the best for last), you play as Lewis Finch, who imagines himself going on fantastic adventures while he works his menial job at a fish cannery. Half of your movements control the "real" Lewis's arm on the right side of the screen as he repeatedly beheads sickly-looking dead fish, while the other half of your movements control the imaginary Lewis on the left side of the screen as he goes on elaborate adventures in his head to stave off his boredom. But you can't surrender to Lewis' fantasy entirely; if you stop sliding the fish across the screen, they'll pile up and block your view of Lewis' imagination. This is just one example of how the game merges gameplay with narrative, involving the player intimately in the stories of the Finch family.

III. OVERALL PRESENTATION

Visuals are extremely important when it comes to story-based games like this, and fortunately, *What Remains of Edith Finch* excels in this area as well. (As a note, keep in mind that I've only played this game on my PlayStation 4, so you may have a slightly different visual and graphical experience if you play it on another console or a PC.) For starters, the game's graphics are beautiful, detailed, and highly realistic, which makes the surreal elements of the story seem that much more real and believable, even when it's hard to suspend your disbelief. The Finch House itself is the visual centerpiece of the game, serving as a huge visual metaphor

for the Finch family and their long, complicated history. It's towering, chaotic, colorful, and a bit scary-looking, but there's also a sense of history and sadness in the place, all reinforced by the attention to detail both inside and outside the house. Books, photographs, and odd knick-knacks clutter up the house, making it feel real and lived-in despite its more absurd features, such as the secret passages, the small castle near the top, and the sealed-off doors with peepholes drilled in, like a museum of the dead Finches' bedrooms. Just like in real life, you can learn a lot about a room's occupant by looking at what's in the room and how it's decorated, and every room in the Finch House is detailed enough to give you a strong sense of what each member of this strange family was like.

As you can tell, my issues with the game's presentation are few and far between. For me, at least, the game stutters and lags a bit in some of the outdoor areas, especially in the beginning of the game. But after I enter the Finch House, it runs perfectly smoothly for the most part. I imagine playing it on PC would give you better performance overall, if your PC is powerful enough to handle modern graphics. Also, while the graphics in general are realistic, many of the visuals are surreal and strange, enhancing the magic realism aspect of the flashbacks. As Edith comments on what she sees and remembers, she writes it in her journal and you can see her words floating around in the world while she speaks them. This never gets in the way of the scenery, instead adding to the theme of reading the Finches' stories as they (often literally) jump off the page.

As for the other aspects of the game's presentation, the music is usually calm, understated, and unobtrusive, and some of it is pretty memorable. To this day, I still sometimes find myself humming the Milton's Tower theme or the tune that plays throughout Lewis's story that starts quiet and gets grander and more elaborate the closer you get to the end. But by far, the

strongest aspect of the presentation is how varied and unique each flashback story is. From both a visual and auditory perspective, each one brings something new to the table; some are colorful and cartoonish, while others are more realistic and grayed out. Some have bombastic and over-the-top visuals, while others are quieter and more somber. Even my least favorite flashback (Barbara Finch's) has such a unique comic book style that it's still fun to play through it again. And of course, a game like this would have fallen flat if it had cheesy voice acting, but practically all of the performances were high-quality and seemed just as heartfelt as every other detail in this fantastically presented game.

IV. STORY

I won't discuss many specifics about the game's story to avoid spoilers, but I'll just say that the story is the game's strongest aspect – the heart and soul of *What Remains of Edith Finch*. As you might expect, the game deals with themes of death and family, but also explores ideas about the nature of stories themselves. How do stories shape our view of the world? Do fictional or half-true stories have any real truth to them? Does it matter if they do or not? Do we focus too much on stories and not enough on day-to-day reality? *What Remains of Edith Finch* reflects on these questions as they relate to the central question of the game's story: Are the Finches dying off because of a family curse, or just because they believe in a family curse? In other words, are the stories about the Finches' deaths self-fulfilling? These are heavy subjects for a video game to tackle, but *What Remains of Edith Finch* treats them gracefully. Despite the almost absurd number of deaths you witness throughout the game, none of them are played for laughs or brushed aside. Each and every one feels meaningful and personal, giving the player control over the Finches' actions, but no control over the eventual, tragic outcome. This helps to drive home

the theme of death's inevitability. You play as the Finches, but you can't change their fate; the Finches can do whatever they wish in their stories, but the authors of the stories always end up dying in the end.

But while death hangs over the game's story, it never feels mopey or depressing or overdone. Despite its dark themes, *What Remains of Edith Finch* remains a brilliant, funny, poignant experience for just about anyone willing to give it a chance. I can understand why it wouldn't appeal to someone who isn't interested in feeling sad over fictional characters, and you could make the argument that it's too sappy or over-reliant on killing off characters to garner sympathy, though I'd disagree. It's certainly an emotional game, but I don't think it ever reaches the point of being overbearing. It never seems to tell the player *how* to feel; it only shows them the stories of this bizarre family and leaves us to make of it what we will. This, too, is a theme of the game: how stories left behind by the dead are interpreted by the next generation. And for what it's worth, I hope the story of *What Remains of Edith Finch* will be continue to be experienced and interpreted long after its developers have passed away. All in all, I can't recommend this game enough. Just bring some tissues if you're a softie like me.