

Megan Kostraba

Dr. Christopher Dowd

Video Games as Literature

10 May 2023

Games Within Games: Changing Perspectives in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

As an individual who is familiar with writing and literature, and all the things that come with it, I feel confident saying that first person point of view is not my favorite. I feel awkward reading it, writing it, all of the above. I understand that a first person perspective is the best way to immerse others into a storyworld—to make individuals feel like they are the “main character”, the one on the adventure. And yet, it’s something I will never be able to fully enjoy. The oddity is, however, that while first person point of view is not my preference when it comes to novels, it is the chosen vantage point of one of my favorite video games.

What Remains of Edith Finch, a game developed by Giant Sparrow and published by Annapurna Interactive, tells the story of teenager Edith Finch, a girl who explores her ancestral home, searching for the stories of her family members after their passing. As the last Finch alive, Edith puts together the puzzle pieces of her family and their mysterious deaths, writing down each journey in her journal. The player acts as Edith through a first person point of view, walking through the house and collecting memories that fill in the missing narrative of each family member. Not only does the player experience the game through Edith, but through the other family members as well. As the player explores the household, they experience both first and third person point of view in the gameworld, keeping them engaged and invested in Edith’s storyline, as well as the stories of her family. These shifts in point of view within the game also change the identity of the player, as they project their own values through different perspectives.

What Remains of Edith Finch implements these different points of view throughout the game, keeping the player immersed, revealing the various identities and secrets of Edith's family, and illuminating on the phenomenon of player identity in games.

When *WROEF* opens and the gameworld is revealed, the player is put in a first person point of view. It's established early on in the game that the player is going to act as Edith, slowly uncovering all the secrets of her family home. Many games, commonly first person shooter games, are put in this particular perspective. Differing from a third person point of view, first person allows the player to occupy the character's perspective, seeing the world through their eyes. As researcher Laurie Taylor writes in her Masters Thesis, *Video Games: Perspective, Point-Of-View, and Immersion*:

The player's understanding of context in first-person point-of-view games commonly is based on the idea that the player plays as the player-character by seeing through the player-character's eyes, which seems to many in the game design field as more intuitive and natural because the player appears to act and perceive the gaming space in the way that the characters act and perceive the game. (Taylor 26)

First person POV is the most commonly used method in literature to get the reader, player, audience (etc.) to understand who the character is, what they are feeling, and why they are feeling it. In novels and books, first person POV lets the reader literally get into the character's mind, letting the reader feel a part of the narrative and providing a sense of escapism. In video games, it's the same sensation, but within the magic circle. When players have the ability to actually *be* the character, looking at the world through their eyes and moving things with their hands, it provides the ultimate sensation of immersion. The sense of being transported to a

fictional world, immersion lets individuals believe in the willing suspension of disbelief, as they engage and participate in a created reality that they're free to enjoy.

When playing *WRoEF*, the narrative of the game depends on the player engaging with Edith and her storyline, as well as the stories of her family. From this specific narrative and game design, *What Remains of Edith Finch* was able to avoid typical problems in spatial awareness that arise solely from first person point of view games. While first person POV does give the best sense of immersion, it does not, however, “Allow for the representation of other-than-visual perception, like often being able to sense entities behind and beside one’s body and being able to see straight ahead, to the periphery, and down all at the same instance” (Taylor 29). Essentially, players are not able to see a physical body that represents themselves or the character. This then enables how players view game narratives and the perspectives from their characters, because the chance to physically see how outside forces affect their character is taken away. In his journal article, “Understanding Games as Played: Sketch for a First-Person Perspective for Computer Game Analysis,” researcher Olli Tapio Leino discusses this view on third person POV. He first acknowledges that any choice of point of view is a strategy, almost manipulation, on the player so that their interpretation of the game (or any literature in general) can be found in an “ideal reader” (Leino 4). Choosing a point of view choice is essential in games, and absolutely does affect how the player is going to interpret, and be immersed within, the game narrative. Leino then describes that players’ response to the game may be more potent by using third person POV—that by actually seeing their characters go through challenges and successes, players may have a more emotive game experience. *What Remains of Edith Finch*, however, is able to evade the debate of first person versus third person by using both points of view together, keeping the player engaged and increasing the interactivity of the game.

As the player walks and explores the Finch household, there are certain family members who have more of an interactive story than others—specifically, Barbara and Lewis. Barbara’s storyline is discovered on the second floor of the house, through the use of a comic book called *Dreadful Stories*. A once child actress, Barbara was famous for her iconic scream, but as she got older, her fame started to plummet along with her ability to scream like she did in her youth. The player explores her story, and her death, by playing as Barbara in the interactive comic panels. While the player is still using the mechanics of first person point of view, certain panels of the comic are visually adapted so that players can see Barbara in a physical body. This particular switch in POV is interesting for the player, as there is no sign that they have suddenly stopped playing as Edith. The player is still controlling Edith, but has also become Barbara. The game world has essentially changed, delving into a new narrative. Although this new plot line is not about Edith, it still remains her story while immersing the player within Barbara’s reality and subsequent death. The game designers of *What Remains of Edith Finch* were able to make this POV change without confusing the player, inserting a game within a game, and making the gameplay experience that much more interesting. A similar thing happens with Lewis and his storyline.

Edith’s oldest brother, Lewis, died while working his job at the cannery. Players don’t know much about Lewis’ character personality, but we do see directly inside his mind through the use of a third person game. His story begins at the cannery, the visuals of the game playing over a voice over from his psychiatrist, Dr. Emily Nuth. Lewis’ playthrough starts with a monotonous tone, as the player cuts fish heads, living and seeing the life that Lewis had. As the voice over continues, Lewis begins to imagine a different world, a fantasy place where he is the hero, the savior, and the King. The player begins to learn about Lewis’ inner thoughts, and how

he likes to escape his daily life by imagining a better one. This is seen visually through the use of a third person POV screen that begins to integrate with Lewis' actual life. As the player continues to decapitate fish, they also begin to play a game, controlling a figure of Lewis' imagination, conquering lands and completing heroic deeds. His internal conflict is represented perfectly through the use of third person POV, as the player easily chops fish heads (as Lewis does) but also plays a fun game where they can escape that boring, tiresome world. Authors Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway comment on this in their journal article, "Worlds at Our Fingertips: Reading (in) *What Remains of Edith Finch*":

Lewis' story is a masterpiece in game storytelling, a perfect illustration of what gameplay and storytelling can achieve when designed to complement each other and take advantage of the strengths of both mediums. The alienation between body and mind as well as between fantasy and reality is captured through the game mechanics. (Bozdog 803)

The image of Lewis' imagination world begins to take over the visual representation of the first person point of view of his real job at the cannery. It simulates his mental state for the player, as their world too becomes surrounded by play-pretend, having more fun imagining and creating a world, rather than facing reality. In his Masters dissertation, scholar Qingqing Zhao also writes about this immersive sensation, stating, "What the player hears and feels is also what the character hears and feels. The brilliant colors and cheerful music make the fantasy world even more realistic than the real factory, and after making choice of the sailing route, it makes the players gradually shift all their attention to the fantasy world" (Zhao 26). When the illusion ends, the player finds themselves back in the fish cannery, completing the journey from first person point of view, to third person, and then back again. The narrative does not end there, however, as

Lewis (the player) finds his way back to his imaginary world, and accepts his crown as King, also signifying his death. Lewis ultimately chose to end his life as “Lewis, who works in a fish cannery”, to become “King Lewis, hero and conqueror”. His suicide ends his journey, and the player once again becomes Edith, who writes down her brother’s journey. All of these changes in point of view throughout Lewis and Barbara’s story are seamless, flowing into one another because of the game’s mechanics and narrative. *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a puzzle for the player to solve, and the changes in point of view are imperative to completing it.

Character identity is integral within the game, as Edith connects to her family and the player learns the identity of each person. This, however, also changes the identity of the player. The player goes between these different points of view, playing as Edith, her family, and also, themselves. When people play video games, in first person or third person POV, their choices and decisions are based on how they perceive their character. Are they making choices that they believe their character would make, decisions that they would personally choose, or choices that they think the game designers would have wanted? It all depends on what the individual values. As author James Paul Gee writes in his book, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning And Literacy*, “Players are projecting an identity onto their virtual character based both on their own values and on what the game has taught them about what such a character should or might be and become” (Gee 53). Gee writes about three different identities that the player may choose to follow in their gameplay—virtual, real-world, and projective identity. Each identity depends on how individuals perceive the character. A virtual identity is one where the player is involved with their character, but also distant; meaning that their character has its own identity which was created by the player. The real-world identity is when a player’s own life influences and filters through their character. The projective identity is a combination of the two,

recognizing that the interaction a player has with a game stems from their real-world person and virtual character (Gee 49-51). Since *What Remains of Edith Finch* implements various perspectives and points of view, the player is constantly reaffirming their identity within the game. When the scenes with Barbara and Lewis come to fruition, it's a sensation of viewing their stories through the eyes of Edith, but also living through the actual narrative visual, as Lewis and Barbara. These game mechanics immerse the player further, as they are an integral part of telling and demonstrating the story for Edith, who the player mainly acts as. The end of the game also reveals an entirely new perspective, as the player discovers that the game narrative has been told through a letter that Edith wrote to her son, who reads it next to her grave at the ancestral home. Even at the end of the game, character and player identity has shifted once more, placing the final puzzle piece down in completion.

Edith's story is not a happy one, and rather than a competitive ending where the player wins, in *WRoEF*, there is no winning. There is simply, being. The player coexists along with Edith's son, both learning the full story of the Finch's. Edith wrote her letter to her son so that he can avoid the same fate that the rest of the family has faced—she does not want him to linger on the past, but rather use it to push him forwards. Without the use of shifting points of view, and player immersion, this story would not be as impactful as it was. Being able to fully immerse themselves within this narrative through the game mechanics, players are able to experience *What Remains of Edith Finch* through the perspectives of Edith, her family, and their own player identities.

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