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An Interview with Sam Barlow

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes interviews writer/director Sam Barlow on his new project *Telling Lies* and the interactive fiction form.

5 mins read

Written by [Jacob Heayes](#) | Oct 4, 2019



Four years have passed since writer/director Sam Barlow released his independent project *Her Story*, an award-winning interactive fiction title that quickly made waves in the industry for its innovative use of live video and non-linear storytelling. Last month, Barlow made his rapturous return to the genre with *Telling Lies*, a spiritual successor that added a high-profile cast (including *Upgrade*'s Logan Marshall-Green and *Halt and*

Catch Fire's Kerry Bishé) and more intricate webs of deceit. Tasked with sleuthing through a stolen NSA hard drive, *Telling Lies* immerses the player in the interpersonal relationships of four characters over the course of two years via Skype calls and webcam footage, as one lie uniformly shatters their lives.

The main interface in *Telling Lies*.

On returning to the successful *Her Story* format, Barlow admits “I definitely didn’t want to do that immediately...I think I allowed enough time to pass that it was annoying that no-one else had ripped it off. A friend who had made some indie games was like ‘you’ll see in two weeks that if the game charts anywhere in the top 50, there’ll be clones in all the stores’. That never worked for *Her Story* so I guess it’s not as easy a thing to clone. So there’s an element of that, kinda being like ‘well if no-one else is gonna do it, I guess I’ll do it’”.

It doesn’t take long for Barlow to explain his interest in returning to live-action video for the project either, expressing that “there was a slight frustration with *Her Story* where it was frequently described as choose-your-own-adventure. The catch-all term for any game that involves footage is ‘interactive movie’ and I was interested in the fact that actually *Her Story* was not very cinematic, and a lot of the things that were being done in *Her Story* were the opposite of how a movie works. With this one, I wanted to dig into that even further and ask what it means to not be a movie, what can you do with video that is not cinematic and still interesting and different?”.

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I then asked Barlow about the challenges of writing and devising a story revolving around four central leads, as opposed to *Her Story*'s single protagonist. “So whereas *Her Story* was one woman in a room on seven different occasions...here we had a two-year period in which these characters were all living their lives. We knew we had this two-year period and we knew the beginning and end. The challenge then was having these

four characters have their stories run in parallel, bounce off each other, making sure that each atomic piece of the story was still interesting and contained something that reflected on the greater plot and the greater themes”.

Logan Marshall-Green in *Telling Lies*.

To give authenticity to the notion of online calls and conversations, Barlow revealed the quirks of the shooting process. “So, early on, I wanted to shoot both sides of the conversation simultaneously and actually have the actors holding devices and seeing each other on-screen. As well as that, we’re going to be shooting everything in one take, so if they had to do a whole seven-minute scene, being able to work off of each other was going to help everyone. We went through a lot of options as to how this was going to work, and the easiest thing would be to shoot on a sound-stage...but I knew that if we were going to shoot on set, you would have rooms that had no ceiling or just three walls, and we would be inhibited in where we could point the camera. So we ended up finding this compound – we called it The Compound – which was like four or five apartments, two houses...we basically just owned all these buildings, this bit of LA and ran wires across the roads and had everything kind of wired up, which is not how things are normally done. We had two mini crews that were all running simultaneously and when we’d go action, that would happen on both sides and then we’d go and I’d be usually somewhere in-between watching everything. If I’d need to give a note, I would usually run to whichever set, give my notes to that actor and then run to the other, or sometimes I would just speak to them through the cameras, because we had everything wired up. There’s this rule though that you’re not allowed to run on a film set, so I’d have to dodge all the PAs who would be telling me not to run”.

“I’m way more interested in the idea of a video game or an interactive story that acknowledges that the player is not totally losing themselves

in the thing, that they have some role that incorporates the fact that they're a member of the audience”

Having delved into the production of *Telling Lies*, I pressed further into Barlow's common thematic threads of surveillance and probing player agency present across his writing career. “As I did more work and got more interested in telling stories within video games and how that's different but also similar to other mediums, I started to question this idea of total immersion in the protagonist, this idea that you are the video game character and that's your avatar. The very simple notion that publishers have is that the video game character should be some aspirational superhero...but then you have that idea of story games and especially games with choices where you question if you're making the choices you would make or if you're making the choices that the character would make. Are you making the choices just for the sake of making the story interesting, deliberately choosing the more interesting, dramatic and violent choices? I think for me, I'm way more interested in the idea of a video game or an interactive story that acknowledges that the player is not totally losing themselves in the thing, that they have some role that incorporates the fact that they're a member of the audience, rather than just pretending they're going to be Spider-Man or whatever. It's the same way when you're in the cinema, you empathise with the main character, you sometimes lose yourself in their story and put yourself in their shoes, but you still have some perspective and some distance and then interesting things happen in that space”.

Sam Barlow laying out the narrative threads of *Telling Lies*.

Barlow has been contributing to the interactive fiction space for decades since his text-adventure *Aisle* released in 1999. In that time, we've seen high-profile titles make technological and narrative leaps such as Giant Sparrow's *What Remains of Edith Finch* or The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*. I asked Barlow his thoughts on the current state of the format. “There's been a ton of interesting work. Like the labelling of *Her Story*, it's frustrating that the more mainstream perception is still very much 1980s

choose your own adventure. Whatever you do, that's what people are expecting, that's what's in their head. You'll get people like Roger Ebert – rest in peace – coming out and saying that an interactive story can never be art. This idea that it's this silly choice that can branch in a hundred different directions and actually, 99% of interactive stories have minimal branching, a lot of it is this illusion. I think on the text side, we've increasingly solved a lot of the interesting problems...the level of complexity and sophistication done by stuff from Inkle or Choice of Games, the level of personalisation and how dynamic some of the workings of those stories are is super cool. The stuff that's still clunkier is trying to reflect that in a more visual way. The nearest we've come to fixing the 'real time-ness' is probably *Oxenfree*, it's still awkward in a choice-based piece of interactive fiction. The characters are talking and then they have to idle whilst you're making your choice, even if you've got a Walking Dead style timer, there's still people stood thinking and it gets slightly more awkward when you bring live-action into it. I think *Oxenfree* by choosing not to have overly animated characters, by choosing to have this more zoomed out view had some of the most excitingly dynamic interactive conversations that I've seen that really did feel like they were organic, meandered and reactive”.

Finally, I ask Barlow for his definitive 'desert island' recommendation – a piece of art or media he would recommend first and foremost at this time. “I have a duty to recommend something that's actually useful. I played an hour of this thing and it blew me away and I also share a publisher with them, but *Outer Wilds*. Everyone I know who's actually finished it will not stop talking about how cool it is, but it is this weird space exploration platforming Metroid-y type game with a *Groundhog Day* premise that's full of secrets and surprises that are just mindboggling in their implementation and it's just a very interesting and cool game. And that plays well on modern consoles and computers right now, so that's a safe recommendation”.

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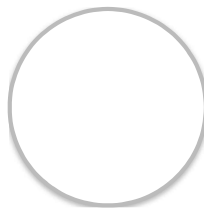
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