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Ludonarrative Discussion: What Remains of Edith Finch

In the first edition of his narrative gaming column, Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes reflects on the achievements of *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

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Written by [& Jacob Heayes](#) | Sep 13, 2019

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What Remains of Edith Finch

Where there's a house, there's a story. Critics reminiscing on *Psycho*'s gothic prowess inextricably fall into Bates Motel's orbit, as do those examining the infamous Manderley estate in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Narrative and location are fundamentally intertwined with these habitats often absorbing as much history and character as those who inhabit them. With that in mind, we arrive at this month's game for discussion – Giant Sparrow's wonderfully haunting, deeply poignant *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

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Edith Finch is the last living member of a family plagued by death. Whether by poisoning, drowning or catapult, the path of the Finch family and the Grim Reaper aren't far removed. As Edith makes a final bittersweet return to the Finch estate, the player is tasked with venturing into its many impossible rooms and uncovering their tragic deaths, one by one. Yet with such an initially downbeat setup, *What Remains of Edith Finch* isn't a game clouded with an inescapably morose atmosphere. Whilst its story is undeniably tinged with loss, *Edith Finch* is akin to a dark fairytale, its unorthodox geography a pastiche of its stylistic influences not dissimilar to Wes Anderson or Tim Burton. In terms of ludic elements, its initial similarities to Fullbright's domestic sleuthing *Gone Home* are striking – the player exploration of an empty house is rewarded with the unfurling of narrative and character. Giant Sparrow immediately distinguishes themselves from *Gone Home* in how they meld geography and story together in such a visually engaging, creative manner. Edith's obscured motivations in returning to the estate form a connecting thread, yet the game more closely resembles a portmanteau of stories – players individually tackle family bedrooms and thus discover the personal tale attached to said room. An early case involves Molly (Edith's great-niece) whose death is masked by her vivid juvenile imagination. Upon entering her bedroom in the present and discovering her diary, the space seamlessly shifts into the past as the player inhabits Molly's perspective. These constant palimpsestes of past and present immediately highlight the family's inescapable ties to their stories. Whilst *Edith Finch* is only largely set in one location, its viewed through several eyes.



Annapurna Interactive, YouTube

These frequent shifts in perspective are felt just as radically in the gameplay as in the visual geography. Giant Sparrow deploy an impressive array of design tricks to constantly keep the player engaged in this 2-hour story, introducing new

mechanics and objectives at an astonishing rate. The game's unconventional design allows Giant Sparrow the creative leeway to experiment with new ideas whilst being enabled with the freedom to toss them out just as quickly moments later. Lewis Finch – a mentally troubled cannery worker – is bestowed with perhaps the game's finest hour. It's one I can't bring myself to spoil but suffice to say, it actively engages with ludonarrative with unbelievable emotional intelligence and self-awareness to translate Lewis' state of mind into the player's physical actions. *Edith Finch*'s most visually mesmerising moment is found within Barbara Finch's tale. An aspiring Hollywood scream-queen, Barbara's story is conveyed and interacted with through a diegetic vintage comic book, scenes and transitions translated as comic-book panels and page turns. This stark visual change is complemented by gorgeous cel-shaded visuals that introduce and shape Barbara's character wordlessly. Trapped inside an artefact of her time, this segment is only one of many examples of deceitful objects scattered throughout the Finch household. An innocent music box doubles as a secret mechanism, a newspaper article depicting the submerged building riddled with its own fantastical fable – and so on. Giant Sparrow quickly conditions the player into doubting their surroundings and separating fact from fiction, a task that quickly transforms into a complicated and emotional affair. The title itself even bears a twisted duality with the 'remains' an ambiguous subject. As Edith traverses secret passages and vertical treetop stairways, the nature of the family and Edie (its matriarch) gradually unravel, once again ingeniously tying narrative progression with the expansion of physical space.

What Remains of Edith Finch refuses to be defined as a cruel tale about the inevitability of death.

As each story is completed, Edith fills out her own Finch family tree in her journal (viewed through pausing the game). This ever-expanding document cleverly mirrors the house's arboreal design that branches out into Escherian tangents and convolutions. Yet perhaps its most poignant feature is the family graveyard – each stone decorated with a unique memorial that commemorates the cause of death. This moment not only materialises the protagonists of those family tales into a colder reality yet solidifies the Finch's toxic relationship with death. It wreaks havoc throughout their upbringing, their lives and their surroundings before physically defining their legacy. After all, we never embody the Finch family at any point *except* their time of death. This is the only time the player is allowed to engage with these people, inevitably attaching an unavoidable melancholy to every segment. *What Remains of Edith Finch* refuses to be defined as a cruel tale about the inevitability of death. Rather, this is a story centered on stories and a

family whose curse is ironically defined by their insistence on possessing one. As these tales of shipwrecked homes, flying boys and malevolent hurricanes compound through time, the Finches lose their grasp on their fiction and embed them within their family history, spending their lives waiting for their own extravagant death. It's embedded within every bedroom, within every object and within every fabric of the Finch estate. Edith Finch's attempt to distance herself from family history is a futile one. The walls breathe these tales.

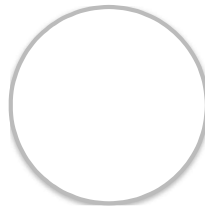
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