Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Her Story
Platform: PC, Mac, iOS, Android
Genre: Mystery, crime
Release Date: June 24th 2015
Developer: Sam Barlow
Publisher: Sam Barlow
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Sam Barlow

Overview

     Her Story is an interactive mystery crime video game created, written and designed by Sam Barlow. Unlike other interactive narrative games, *Her Story* has its own unique approach to this genre of storytelling, and it's done extraordinarily well. The game's premise is simply stated as "a video game about a woman talking to the police."[1] The player browses through an old police database system to find short VHS-taped video clips of a woman being interrogated on seven different occasions regarding the murder of her husband in 1994. But beneath the surface, there's more than just one mystery to unfold. The intoxicating way in which the narrative is designed draws players into an obsessive determination to solve these mysteries. This murder mystery game is more than just a classic whodunit story; it's also a howdunit and whydunit. The player has the opportunity to unravel hundreds of clues to interpret what truly happened to the woman's husband, and take on the compelling and challenging role as a detective.

Characters

- **Hannah Smith** – Hannah has been sent to a police station in Portsmouth for questioning on her missing (and murdered) husband, and the players have access to her recorded answers through footage provided in the database. Despite being shy and co-operative with the police, her behavior hints that she is hiding something.

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[1] Barlow, Sam. Her Story. N.p., 2014. Web. 19 Sept. 2016.

- **Simon Smith –** Although not seen in the game, Simon is a crucial character and asset to the game's story because he is the inciting incident. The players must rely on his wife, Hannah, to offer enough information to figure out who killed him by listening to *her story*.

- **Eve –** Eve is a fascinating character because her existence is questionable. She is Hannah's identical twin or – if she suffers from disassociate identity disorder – a split personality Hannah takes on. Unlike Hannah, she has a confident and upbeat personality, making their contrasting personalities distinguishable.

- **Sarah –** Throughout the narrative, Sarah can be discovered to being Eve's (or Hannah/Eve's) child, which is later revealed to be the player. As the player discovers vital information, her reflection flickers on the database's screen, defining her importance to the story.

Breakdown

Signed in as AUTH_GUEST, the player finds themselves operating an old computer system, with a police database system called L.O.G.I.C. already opened. The word "MURDER" is already typed into the search box, prompting the player to press the search button themselves. With just this simple and well-thought setup, the player is unknowingly being taught how the searching mechanic works. The game already respects that the player understands how to use a search engine, especially since many of us use a search engine like Google practically every day. Once the player searches "MURDER," the database will retrieve four video results for the player to watch. The very first video is brief, with a woman, later introduced as Hannah, stating "You think its murder? Clearly it's murder." It is then followed by three other videos that also mention murder. The redundancy of this word "murder" hints to the player that the current word searched is relevant to the transcript of the videos. Additionally, there are some inconspicuous instructions to assist the player. On the desktop – next to the database – are two .txt documents. The "Readme" file clearly explains how to use the database and the "REALLY_Readme!!!" file is a personal note from someone named "SB" explaining how the player was granted access. As the player progresses through these starter videos, they find new key points of information, such as the fact that they are talking about "Simon's murder." With this newly found knowledge and an understanding of how the transcripts work, the player will most likely search up "Simon" hoping to find out what happened to him. By just searching "Simon," the database has found a whopping 61 entries. These videos informs the player that Simon's full name is Simon Smith, he works at Ernst Brothers Glass and then continues to state some facts about him. More key names, locations and phrases start to pop up, and already that is enough to start driving the player's curiosity. Although the database claims there are 61 entries for "Simon," its

access is limited so that the user (player) can only see the first 5 entries. It's an ingenious tactic Barlow designed so that the player is only given a certain amount of information at once, and due to this limitation, it encourages the player to listen for more clues in order to find those other entries. An important clue that demonstrates the value of having access restrictions is the word "wig." With 7 entries found, only 5 can be viewed. One of those hidden videos is one of the very last videos recorded in the seventh and last session, which contains the biggest spoiler in the game: how the murder plays out. The first 2 videos listed both possess Hannah asking the same question: "What type of wig?" Even though they're useless videos, their purpose is bump the spoiler video down to be listed 6th to avoid players from seeing that final video so they don't solve the murder too early. A very neat trick.

Within just a few minutes of gameplay, the player already understands how the game works, the controls and their goal. Once the player hears "Simon's murder" in the first batch of videos, the player has found the central premise of the game. However, as more incoherent information is revealed, it starts to open up new mysteries, urging the player to find out more. Getting the player immersed into the game as quickly as possible is extremely crucial, just like how it is in film; if the viewer is not introduced to the main character, the dramatic premise and the situation within the first 10 minutes of the movie, it will be uninteresting and could potentially become a chore to keep watching.

What is quite remarkable is the simplicity of the main mechanic. This searching mechanic acts as a progressive system that drives the narrative forward. Despite going back and forth in time based on the order of the clips being watched, the story is still moving forward because the player is uncovering more of the story over time. As the players piece together the story, they start to visualize and form the events that happened in their head, encouraging the use of imagination. When players discover a new time stamp in the story, they can start to organize their own timeline to grasp what has happened, making it easier to assess what Hannah, and eventually Eve, are talking about.

Her Story does what many games strive for; to design a realistic perspective in the player's role. It feels authentic. It feels like you are truly uncovering a mystery with no assistance. This approach of freedom gives a more personal approach to the story. Because there is so much freedom in the way the narrative is told, the game encourages you to follow your instincts, chase down leads, and prove your suspicions. Even when you misspell or type an invalid word, the game offers no punishments for finding no search results. Overtime, players can add relevant or important video clips to their user session to keep them close at hand when discovering new connections. Since the videos are not easily labelled and presented with very similar thumbnails, it can be hard to remember what has been spoken in certain videos. Fortunately, the player can type out their own notes to the videos in the "Use Tags" box, so they can keep track of which video is which. That way, the player does not have to rely on remembering which outfit she wore to spark their memory. This simple organization tool encourages the player do

what detectives do… take notes! On an additional note, the trailer of the game states to "listen to her words," which is another defining aspect of the game. Players must rely on their power of observation. Many mystery games, films and television shows focus on the action of catching the perpetrator, rather than the actual brainpower needed to solve the crime. *Her Story* actually lets you use your brain to solve the mystery, which feels empowering and rewarding. This type of interactivity is an experience that film and television cannot recreate or perfect.

The story takes place in *her* perspective, living up to its title. There are red herrings and false information given, because Hannah is in control of how she tells the story. The story is presented in her voice, so she can choose what to say and what not to say, and because it is told in her perspective, the player can choose to believe whether or not she's telling the truth. However, there is another hidden perspective the player will realize over time. Eve is eventually discovered to be Hannah's twin sister, and after learning that they like to play the ol' switcheroo often, players may recognize Eve pretending to be Hannah in certain interrogation sessions. The game is told through extradiegetic narration, meaning the narrators, Hannah and Eve are not *currently* a part of the story, and so they recall the events in past tense. However, Hannah and Eve are both homodiegetic narrators, because they participated in the stories that they are telling. And since these two characters have unique contrasting personalities, they each have their own way of recalling what has happened. Hannah and Eve's recollections of memories, facts, and events can confuse, trick and mislead the player, which makes the player's role as a detective more challenging. It would be such an easy game if they only told the truth!

Unlike other narrative-driven games, *Her Story* is not told within the current primary storyworld. The player enters the world during the aftermath; all the events, drama and action have already happened, so the player must rely on Hannah and Eve to tell them their story. However, based on their reactions to the unheard questions, the body language they portray and catching them lying, Hannah and Eve can be sensed as unreliable. The story one tells can be told otherwise in different sessions. There are numerous occurrences to catch the two lying, especially Hannah lying about Eve's presence. For example, Hannah states no one was home when her parents died. However, Eve states Hannah hid her in the attic, even after Hannah moved out. The player can also catch the two of them acting. If the player searches "living room," they will find a video from June 30th with Hannah explaining her alibi on the night Simon never came home. The next video listed is from the following day, July 1st. This time it's Eve, stating the exact alibi Hannah stated before, word for word. Through this detective work, the player has proof that they both rehearsed an alibi that was so perfectly executed, that it is obviously a lie.

Due to the discovery nature of the game, it is possible for the player to accidentally find one of the last few videos that reveals most of the mystery. This does not mean the player has "won" the game, but it will be more confusing if the player did

not find certain clues beforehand because they might not understand what is being told in those clips. There can even be times when the player is stuck midgame, and can't think of any words to search up. This may encourage players to search up common words in the English language like "the," "of" or "and" to find unwatched clips and redirect themselves. Would this be considered cheating? Maybe, maybe not. The whole point *is* to uncover what happened, however this method does not feel earned.

Even though the game is not a walking simulator set within a huge space to explore, there is still great environmental storytelling being done. The old user interface adds to the gameplay's mood, tone and atmosphere. Once the player hears the system booting up, their presence seems sly and sketchy compared to the familiarity of using modern technologies. Even the small and unnoticeable can enhance the overall experience – like when the player types, they can hear nostalgic clickety clack sounds because each key has been assigned an audio clip from an old mechanical keyboard. Also, with the added static ambience being heard quietly in the background, it feels like the player is sneaking onto a forbidden computer in the middle of the night. Almost as if they are in a stealth scene of a movie!

To add more significance to the narrative, *Her Story* has numerous themes, motifs, and metanarratives that the game focuses on that interprets Hannah and Eve's bizarre and rare relationship:

Fairy Tales – Hannah and Eve would bring up these tales from their childhood and compare their lives to them, specifically the recurring story of Rapunzel looking out of her window. In the beginning, Hannah explains the full story of Rapunzel, admitting these stories seem real to her. Eve validates this by stating they were obsessed with fairy tales because they were dark and real just like life. Eve highly relates to being Rapunzel when she eventually explains how she met Hannah: She was always stuck indoors, so she would look out her window to see a girl across the street who looked just like her.

Reflections – This metaphorical theme enhances Hannah and Eve's bond as twins. Since they are identical, they are seen towards one another as a mirror image of themselves; a reflection. Once Hannah and Eve met, they would try to look exactly like each other, so if one had a new physicality like a haircut or injury, the other would replicate it. They wanted to become one girl. The narrative goes even further with this theme by discussing palindrome names; a name that reads backwards like forwards. Both Hannah and Eve's names are palindromes, and one brings up naming a daughter Ava, but refused to give her a palindrome name, and insisted on Sarah. This theme of reflections also has ties towards Simon's death. He was a glazier, and a mirror he made as a gift for Hannah – and eventually Eve – ties into how he died in the first place.

Mental Illness – There are many occurrences when Hannah and Eve can be perceived as having a possible mental disorder (like dissociate identity disorder) due to

their psychotic nature. Eve sings a song called "The Wind and the Rain," which the lyrics imagines a girl drowning her sister – and Hannah admitted she wanted to drown "her friend" Eve. There are also some moments where Hannah is speaking in third-person to herself when the police are outside of the room, and she tries to communicate through knock code to Eve, who is supposedly not present. This theme can be interpreted in many different ways based on the player's judgement.

Successful Element

Throughout every playthrough, each player will interpret the narrative differently based on how they perceived the video surveillance they found. The slightest of clues can steer one's mind to think the otherwise, such as the mystery about Hannah's sister. Who is Eve really? Is it really Hannah in all the videos? Does Hannah have a split personality? Did she make up Eve? Is she acting as Eve in certain interrogations? Or is she just psychotic? Or is it both Hannah and Eve being interrogated? Or is it all just Eve? Did Eve kill her before the interrogations started and stole her identity? Did she kill Hannah halfway through the sessions? There are so many theories to this very complex story. A game having an interpreted narrative is a clever way to continue to the story's discussion even after finishing the game, and an easy way to satisfy everyone's personal theories. It would be upsetting if the game stated what truly happened, disrespecting the amount of effort players put into trying to prove their interpretations. There is no random NPC or UI heads-up display that randomly blurts out and explains the evidence, because the game trusts that player is smart enough to figure it out themselves. The game doesn't hold the player's hand throughout the mystery. But rather, it softly nudges the player towards the right direction, and allows them to uncover the mystery themselves. That's the magic of detective work. This type of discovery narrative works extremely well in the mystery genre. And with that, *Her Story* is by far the best form of entertainment that makes you feel like a detective figure.

If the story was literally about Simon's murder, it wouldn't have went far. Allowing Hannah and her sister to also be a mystery adds a layer of complexity. At the beginning, it's fair to predict that Hannah would have something to do with the murder. It would be less intriguing if it was someone only mentioned in the game and never personally confronted. Hannah and Eve are the only two characters seen in the game, so it should be guaranteed to at least be one of them. Adding in these layers of mysteries steers players away from the central mystery and makes it a deeper and darker story. Overtime, players will become hungry for more and gain ambition to solve the other mysteries leads, such as the sister mystery and pregnancy mystery.

Unsuccessful Element

Infinite kudos to Barlow for this well-crafted narrative experience. However, the ending needs to be discussed, because this is where the game surprisingly falls flat.

Around half way through the game, an anonymous person named SB will message you asking if you are finished. This can confuse the player. It can make them think that they may be already done without realizing it, and if so can cause them to think they have been tracking down the wrong leads, or have missed a significant piece of information. It's a fun little Easter egg for Sam Barlow to implement his initials, but does that suggest it is him at the other end of the line? We never truly know who this person is, so what is the significant of this character, besides ending the game?

In the end, this person will ping you a second time, revealing that the player is the daughter of Eve (or Hannah/Eve) named Sarah. Allowing the internal and external narratives to morph into the same story world adds a nice twist, but this newly learned perspective can distort the player's entire point of view of the game they just finished playing. At first, the essence of being an inconspicuous persona lets the player imagine themselves to be anyone they seemed fit: a detective, lawyer, a CIA agent, FBI agent, or even a reclusive hacker. But suddenly, the game casually points out they are a presumed role outside (and within) the story. Since it is later revealed that Eve (or Hannah/Eve) is the player's mother, the player is unable to establish an immersion between this mother-daughter relationship. The player *did* establish a connection with the two sisters by feeling empathy and remorse through the stories they shared. However, the player has to quickly think back and re-create a different and specific emotional attachment towards the story they had discovered, which seems a little disorienting. It's a cool mind-blowing twist, but it's hard to implement it so that the player can *accept* being assigned the role as the secretive daughter. Yes, the game does visually hint at Sarah's (the player's) presence. As the player uncovers major plots in the narrative – specifically the baby storyline – the screen will quickly reflect the image of a young woman, behind the computer screen. But some players may miss this hint and continue to discover the story in their now established and devoted perspective; that just proves how immersive the narrative's magic circle is! Even if the player did get the hint – that they may be an important character – it does not stop the player from re-evaluating their point of view. However, if this was analyzed from a different perspective besides narrative design, this design choice would be very affective: the reflection of Sarah and the police sirens is a great UI design because it easily – and dramatically – alerts the player that they're on the right track.

In cases where the players didn't get far in uncovering the story, the ending can be dissatisfying. Solving the mysteries or not, you simply log off to end the game. While there is no acknowledgment for finishing the game, the essence of playing it is treasuring. However, having no well-established denouement leaves the conclusion at a bland state with the player watching the credits roll, wondering if they truly completed the game or not.

Highlight

There is no exact highlight in the game, but that's what makes the experience more personal. The highlight can be anytime – even every time – the player gets a huge *epiphany*. It can happen at any time based on the player's playthrough, and it's such a fantastic and rewarding feeling. Once the player starts makes connections, that's where the gameplay experience becomes enchanting. The player starts to discover clues about the smallest of things – for example, the tattoo. In the July 1st session Hannah clearly has a tattoo on her arm, and a week before on June 25th, she doesn't. Did she get the tattoo recently? Search up "tattoo" to find that she got it when she moved out and when she first met Simon. That proves she didn't get it last week because that does not match the timeline. Simon apparently guessed her name right from it. The tattoo is an apple and snake, a biblical name? Eve? Search up "Eve" to find Hannah admitting her name is Eve, her sister, in a later session. They're twins?! Wait, is Eve being Hannah? Think back to the tattoo – in a few sessions she doesn't have a tattoo! That must be Hannah, and the one that possess the tattoo must be Eve! What an exhilaration! Just like that, the player can get a hunch on something and try it out to see where it goes. Compared to other detective mystery games, no one's life is the on the line and there is no devastating conclusion to a tough decision – just the excitement, purity and satisfying acknowledgment of uncovering the mystery by yourself.

Critical Reception

Her Story received critical acclaim, gathering many positive reviews from popular critics like *IGN* and *Gamespot*. However, it was worthy of interest to find if there were any negative or mixed reviews. Less than a few do exist, such as *GameCritics.com*'s review.

- *IGN* – Brian Albert – 8.5/10:
  Albert calls *Her Story* "a wonderful, brave video game unlike anything I've played before." He states "it's refreshing to make progress based on what you learn or feel, and not on what you collect." Albert tackles the pros and cons of guessing words when stuck as "those guesses led to legitimate leads when the trail I'd 'earned' went cold." However, he says if the game didn't let him do that, he "would have missed out on at least 15 important videos, but the effectiveness of simple guessing undermined the sense that I was working my own way through a mystery." Albert additionally makes a positive note on the game's respect towards various "mature themes such as mental illness, identity, loss, and infidelity." He also appreciates the "different yet totally viable theories" the narrative supports

and concludes saying "video game stories often […] don't leave much room for interpretation, which makes *Her Story*'s success all the more impressive." [2]

- *Gamespot* – Justin Clark – 8/10:
  Clark explains *Her Story* as "a 200-piece psychological puzzle offering the cheap, gamey thrills of putting two parts together, but it is much deeper, darker, and even sadder when you realize what the picture might be when it's finished." He says that although there is no official way to lose, a game over scenario would be "simply losing one's way through the narrative [and] it's relatively simple to do." Clark praised Viva Seifert's spectacular performance as Hannah and/or Eve, stating "when the truth finally leaves her lips, it comes with such a preternatural calm for something that should set off alarm bells for anyone else watching, which makes the character and the performance even more affecting." [3]

- *GameCritics.com* – Mike Suskie – 6/10:
  Suskie starts off by stating *Her Story*'s "plot feels perpetually stuck in its first act, all exposition and buildup with nowhere to go." Suskie even decides to refer to Hannah as Eve for the entire review, not supporting the other possible interpretations players could have. He confirms saying there isn't an actual 'conclusion,' and could not find a "single detail or explanation tying it all together." He could not find himself engaged in Hannah and/or Eve's life, saying he "sifting through hours of her anecdotes with no concrete answers." It is understandable that if one finds the narrative unappealing, it can cause the ending to be dissatisfying. Not every player will be easily immersed into narrative and some may find making connections hard to accomplish, which can thus feel intimidating. He concludes saying "I'm not convinced that *Her Story*'s format […] is a major step forward for the medium." [4]

Lessons

- Lesson 1 - *Allow the player to perform the actions to drive the story forward.* Great game design is allowing the player feel smart. This game allowed the player to do everything: search up key terms, listen to her story, discover clues, make connections, create their own theories, and solve the mysteries. The game did not hold the player's hand throughout the story and state the obvious, or dubious. Rarely has a game respected and relied on the player to figure out the story for themselves.

- Lesson 2 – *Conduct research.* Find inspiration through what interests you and research it. Barlow was interested in creating a crime game with police interviews. He conducted his research on police interrogation techniques, police

[2] Albert, Brian. "Her Story Review." *IGN*. IGN, 29 June 2015. Web. 13 Oct. 2016.
[3] Clark, Justin. "Her Story Review." *GameSpot*. N.p., 24 June 2015. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.
[4] Suskie, Mike. "Her Story Review." GameCritics.com. N.p., 23 July 2015. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

manuals, and even examined real case files and interview transcripts. He implemented Christopher Porco's transcripts into his engine as an early prototype, which helped him figure out the true nature of his game. Convicts like Porco would repeat certain words and themes, which is exactly what detectives listen for when reviewing these videos: word choice and subtext.[5]

- Lesson 3 – *Develop a unique discourse to enhance a game's narrative design.* If discourse is treated as a game mechanic, it will become a stronger mechanic that enhances the narrative. Unlike traditional story games, this story was told in the past tense, relying on observing a non-playable character's words. Story games like RPGs tend to allow the player be a part of the story by giving them control to alter it and have multiple paths and endings. But thinking of new ways to *represent* a game's story is refreshing and exciting. Many focus more on story and less on discourse, which is why there isn't much originality, thus making *Her Story* stand out among the rest. If *Her Story* kept its story but had the typical discourse structure found in most games, it would have not been as memorable, impactful or genuine.

Summation

In the end, *Her Story* is an absolutely fantastic game, and should be considered a staple classic in interactive narratives as a stellar example of crime fiction. The immersive gameplay of catching lies, deciphering subtext, and proving theories offers the player a rewarding and realistic experience of stepping into the shoes of a detective. High acclaim should be rewarded to Barlow for creating a memorable and forever timeless narrative.

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[5] Benson, Julian. "The Real Murder Behind Her Story." *Kotaku UK*. N.p., 10 July 2015. Web. 2 Nov. 2016.