



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET

Institutionen för Filosofiska  
Department of Philosophy

# Myth-making, or Neglect?

Questions of Nihilism in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Nicholas Alexander

Sharon Rider

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Released in 2017, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is often touted as a ‘narrative experience’ rather than a video game. It won several awards in the year it was released, and has been reissued on every major console thereafter. In it, the player is tasked with discovering as much as they can about the Finch family history. The primary gameplay loop consists of exploring an otherworldly house, finding one’s way into a sealed room, usually belonging to one of the Finch children, and then examining written documents and environmental details to discover how the character died. In the process of examining each room, the player is forced to take control of and re-enact their final moments. Some of the stories adopt a third-person omniscient perspective, others are more ambiguous; ultimately each story allows the player character Edith to catalogue a new branch of the Finch family tree in her diary. At the story’s conclusion, we learn that Edith, who has been narrating the stories as we play them, died in childbirth. The implication, unreliability of narration aside, is that her son, as the last living Finch, has read these stories and returned to the family house to pay his respects. It remains ambiguous whether the titular remains are of the family matriarch Edith ‘Edie’ Finch, who is framed as the villain of the story, or of Edith Finch, the player character.

What little academic discourse there is about this game primarily concerns itself with mechanical aspects of storytelling. Sánchez Trigo attempts to deal with player interaction as a kind of attachment, unique to the video game medium.<sup>1</sup> Bozdog and Galloway focus on the relatively unique blend of reader/player *Edith Finch* demands, while dissertations by Zhao and Boers both discuss interactivity, the latter with a queer theoretical framework.<sup>2</sup> Kirkland’s *‘He Died A Lot’; Gothic Gameplay in What Remains of Edith Finch* is most notable here for pinpointing certain elements of the story—morbid preoccupations, boundary crossings, vague supernatural horror—as a continuation of gothic literary

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<sup>1</sup> Clara Sánchez Trigo, ‘Agency and Interactivity in the Narrative Video Game ‘What Remains of Edith Finch’’, Exploring Rita Felski’s *Hooked*, 45th AEDEAN Conference, RiUMA, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway, ‘Worlds at Our Fingertips: Reading (in) *What Remains of Edith Finch*’, *Games and Culture*, 15/7 (2020), 789–808; Qingqing Zhao, ‘Storytelling Through Games Mechanics: A Study on *Dark Souls*, *Gorogoa* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*’, Master’s Dissertation, University of Dublin, 2021; Cat Boers, ‘Toward a Working Theory of QUEER Hypermedia: An Analysis of Queer Textual Structures in *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*’, Master’s Dissertation, Humboldt University, 2019.

tradition.<sup>3</sup> While each of these articles has their merits, it is nihilism, particularly the nihilistic viewpoints offered by Edie and Lewis Finch, that keep this author preoccupied.

*What Remains of Edith Finch* is a story about how one's approach to life is shaped by mythology in the form of family legacy and tradition. Death, specifically the untimely death of Edie's children, has given rise to the Finch family curse: the belief that from the moment Edie's father Odin fled Norway with his entire house in tow and reached the shore of Washington—where he promptly died—the Finch family was cursed with fatal bad luck. Edie's fixation with the curse leads her to neglect her children and grandchildren, causing the deaths of Molly, Calvin, and Walt, albeit indirectly, and perpetuating the sense both within and outside the family that the curse is real, which in turn results in further negligence and the deaths of her grandchildren. The player gets the sense that the curse has become the foundational belief of the Finch family. If the crux of the story is foundational belief, and nihilism is a rejection of foundational beliefs, this begs the question: to what extent is this story nihilistic? Indeed, what can we learn about nihilism from this story? Through gameplay, narration, and environmental storytelling, *What Remains of Edith Finch* offers several answers to these questions.

## What Is There?

The environmental narrative elements of *What Remains of Edith Finch* are steeped in death symbolism: the house is surrounded by toxic foxglove plants, there are empty bird cages in Edie's room, and taxidermy pets and hunting trophies litter the house.<sup>4</sup> Each room has been repurposed as a shrine to one of her children, complete with a painted effigy. Death is the inciting incident for the story; the death of Odin's wife and child spurs him to flee Norway, and Odin himself drowns just before arriving at Orcas Island, Washington, in 1937. Edie and her husband Sven's first act on arrival to the new world is to build a graveyard, which the player visits in the game. Death, normally a fail state in video game narratives, is the game's goal, with the player character recreating

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<sup>3</sup> Ewan Kirkland, "'He Died a Lot': Gothic Gameplay in *What Remains of Edith Finch*", in *Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead*, ed. by Matt Coward-Gibbs (2020), p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Kirkland, p. 96.

each death in the family, sometimes from a first person perspective.<sup>5</sup> Of course every Finch will eventually die, but the curse is more than simply death itself; Edie is a staunch believer that her children will die young, in unexpected ways, or with a hint of tragic irony.

Tragedy is of course a key element in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche writes about two intertwined, competing impulses: Apollonian reason and Dionysian passion. These are required for art of all kinds, but Nietzsche uses classical drama as the ur-example. In the best of these, the protagonists struggle against their fate; their reasoned understanding of goodness, justice, and natural law is usurped by the passions of the gods, who are not obliged to follow the same rules. His main criticism of Socrates is that he emphasized reason to such a degree that he diffused the value of myth and suffering, replacing it with human knowledge and reason.<sup>6</sup> The image of Socrates happily meeting his fate sums up *science*, the state of knowing (as opposed to the processes of science).<sup>7</sup> This led to an elevation of the Apollonian, which in turn led to art lacking the necessary vitality and passion of the Dionysian. Nietzsche mentions that the Dionysian in turn lacks the form and structure to make a coherent piece of art. Essentially, nothing worthy of a philosopher's attention uses just one of the two halves of human experience. Socrates' optimism is the death of tragedy, and pessimism is the birth of true art.

*What Remains of Edith Finch* reinterprets this dualistic notion as two sides of the same force. Death is unreasonable, but it can be understood. An Apollonian state of knowing empowers the dying with optimistic reason. The curse, though? It is the fate against which each Finch must struggle. Environmental details show Edie playing into the idea that the family curse is a real, supernatural inevitability. In Edie's room, Edith finds a newspaper interview titled 'Dragon Kills Finch;' Edith's narration explains that the dragon was in reality, a slide Sven was building on the side of the house, stating "she could have told them, but she didn't." Nearby is another clipping from 1991 about a mole-man living under the Finch house, and Edith states that her mother Dawn was furious

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<sup>5</sup> Kirkland, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, p. 82.

about this, perhaps because Walt was still living in a bunker under the house when Edie gave this interview. While exploring the house, Edith implies that Edie believed in her own tales, whether or not they were true, including both Molly's final diary entry and Barbara's *Tales from the Crypt*-esque comic book. The fact that she already began memorializing Lewis Finch in a painting, even before he died, further supports Edie's willingness to accept this fate, or even encourage it, rather than attempt to fight against it.

The twist, as it were, is that there is no curse, or rather that the curse is not *real* in that Odin did not bring enduring bad luck from Norway to Washington. Rather, the curse is a mechanism the story uses as a shorthand to illustrate *foundational belief*. The curse is epistemologically justified in and of itself, and depends upon no additional beliefs or knowledge. Any and all actions Edie takes depend ultimately on the curse being a *real*, core principal of the Finch family.

A dearth of evidence suggests that Edie kept the curse constantly at the forefront of her kids' minds. When Molly dies, Edie is directly responsible for sending her to bed without food, and she eats holly berries as a result. Blaming the curse negates responsibility for Edie, and she instead believes the story Molly wrote in her diary and even names the cat after her. Calvin is swinging in a precarious place when he dies. The heights marked on Sam's door continue to the age of 18, while Calvin's stop at 11, meaning Sam was living in his brother's shrine for several years. While certain environmental details within the house are consistent with Barbara's comic, it is never revealed how a commercially available work would be privy to details only Edie knew about the night of her daughter's murder. In Walt's death sequence, he describes his life as comfortable, such that even the monster at the door, which he explicitly states is representative of the curse, is simply part of his daily routine. Though it is left ambiguous whether his death is symbolic or literal, it is unquestionably the monster—the curse—that causes it. Whether her children passively accept the curse, as Walt does, or actively deny it, as Dawn attempts to do, the curse remains a *fact of the matter* that each Finch life must orbit. When Dawn accuses Edie of killing her children with stories, it is this foundational belief to which she is referring.

One of the many ways we defined nihilism in this course is as a rejection of foundational beliefs. Edie's foundational belief, the bedrock upon which she builds her life, is a thought-terminating cliché, externalizing the blame for avoidable tragedies. Edith's journey to the house and exploration of her family history is a process of digging downward to find this bedrock. Edith's reaction to the stories, then, and the player's reaction by extension, represent a nihilistic philosophical process. *What Remains of Edith Finch* asks the player to decide whether a real, supernatural, external force is causing the deaths of the Finch children, and if not, whether the curse, passed on through Edie's stories, is a front that she uses to rationalize her neglectful behaviour. If the former, the player's nihilism results from the denial of death; if the latter, their nihilism results from the denial of the death of meaning.<sup>8</sup> As Gertz says, "both for existentialism and postmodernism, nihilism is an evasion of reality in the form of an evasion of freedom."<sup>9</sup>

*The Birth of Tragedy*, and in particular, the preface written for its second edition, approaches nihilism in a similar way. Young Nietzsche asked the wrong question in his first attempt; fixated on the origin of tragedy, he failed to realize that his real query was the origin point of knowledge itself. An excess of the Dionysian causes one to "cast a true glance into the essence of things" only to discover that one's own actions can change nothing.<sup>10</sup> Glimpsing this truth highlights all the absurd and horrific elements of daily life.<sup>11</sup> It is only art, personified by Nietzsche as an enchantress, that can transform the horrific reality into "notions with which it is possible to live."<sup>12</sup> Both Edie and Lewis are nihilistic insofar as they employ the comic and the sublime in various ways to cope with the paralytic knowledge of "the chasm of oblivion."<sup>13</sup>

For Edie, as for Nietzsche, her life would be better if she believed in nothing, but she finds comfort, even laughter, in absurdity. Edie engages in a kind of passive nihilism by rationalizing the deaths of her children as being in

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<sup>8</sup> Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Gertz, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, p. 46.

some way reasonable. The curse is a science—in this case, the *art* of science, which requires an unjustifiable faith in itself that there is some logic or rationality between the lines, making *myth* a more appropriate term—that allows Edie to escape the truth of their deaths. She has created an illusion of meaning to hide from the inevitability of death, which in most cases results from situations that she herself made possible. Where Edie sees a curse, there are only arbitrary actions and consequences; ideas unfounded and therefore essentially violent, made acceptable via mysticism.<sup>14</sup> In the death of her child, Edie has confronted metaphysical meaninglessness, and turned away from that realization with the (flawed) view that there is, in fact, a justification for what she has experienced: the curse is the ultimate reason. Notably, we do not play through Edie’s last moments, in which it is implied that she mixed wine with contraindicated medication. Edith merely states that Edie “was gone” when they returned to the house.

I find it telling that Edie appears to be immune to the curse. Edie has long ago stopped being serious, and is willing to “laugh along.”<sup>15</sup> This is, in a way, a cautionary tale, warning against magical thinking. Edie imbued her children with the reckless ambition that in turn led to their deaths and the myths she constructed around those deaths edified her belief, and continued the cycle. Edie is the outlier here; by accepting the curse is real, but not running away from it, she outlives almost everyone.

## Why Should I?

The unintended consequences of both Edie’s negligence and her insistence in the validity of the curse leads her to a passive, laughing nihilism, but it leads Lewis down a decidedly more pessimistic path.<sup>16</sup> Prior to his brother’s disappearance, Lewis is stated to be proud of his Indian heritage, and the iconography in his room cements this notion. Perhaps this drive to escape the Finch legacy leads to his use of drugs as well, which can still be found around

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<sup>14</sup> Gianni Vattimo, and Santiago Zabala, *Nihilism and emancipation : ethics, politics, and law*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Gertz, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Gertz, p. 60.

his room. Dawn encourages this escapism by finding him a mundane job at a nearby cannery, which Edith says was her mother's attempt to avoid the curse.

We primarily hear Lewis' story from a formal yet subtly emotional letter from his psychologist. His death sequence consists of a clever use of ludonarrative immersion, in which the right hand controls the monotonous task of chopping the heads off fish arriving by assembly line, while the left controls an increasingly immersive hallucination. As the daydream grows in detail and complexity, your attention is drawn away from your job until you lose sight of the machinery entirely and are instead conquering fantasy realms. As it occurs to Lewis just how much better his imaginary life has become than his real life, he enters a palace, and with a cheering crowd egging him on, he lays his own head on the guillotine, and "accepts his crown."

Lewis might be described as apathetic, since he shows no inclination to explain (as a pessimist would) or to engage with his feelings (as a cynic would). Lewis retreats into his imagined world, but it doesn't adversely affect his work ethic or attendance. He is a model employee and his psychologist describes him as a kind man. While at first glance Lewis is lost in his own world, his own abyss, in reality he is *carrying on*, as present as he can possibly be in a boring, alienating job. Just carrying on is not an answer to nihilism, it *is* nihilism. This makes Lewis an active nihilist, in a way, and a foil to Edie in that his problem is primarily an existential one in which he seeks to create his own freedoms and responsibilities rather than succumb to the nature imposed upon him by his birth name and his job.

It is not that Lewis cannot feel, nor that he refuses to feel; rather, there is no place for feelings in the external world. Lewis' mindset aligns with a post-modern nihilistic ethic when he tells his psychologist that he is completely in control. Lewis has realized that reality has no bedrock aside from what has been collectively constructed—what we decide to call bedrock—and that there is no practice to replace the emptiness found at the core. Those who have yet to realize that most of their subjective experience is artifice must continue with their meaningless lives. His life becomes reflexive, too, when he decides, having conquered his fantasy world, he must now be overthrown as well. In the world of politics, the conditions for equality and liberty are not naturally given,



“society must actively create these ideals or it will inevitably fall prey to irrationality, prejudice, and oppression.”<sup>17</sup> Overcoming the need for external authority is essential—emancipation will remain unattainable otherwise. The authority we defer to often takes the form of organized religion, or capital-I Ideas like *the nation* and *economics*, and in this case “the curse” and “being a Finch” are also on that list.

Lewis’ job is also significant, in that it is tightly controlled, monotonous, and repetitive to the degree that it erodes his identity. The work itself is alienation for Lewis, making his identity meaningless, and if that’s the case, then all identities become meaningless. In the real world, to replace this feeling, we accumulate; how much you make is really how much you are able to consume. Lewis instead creates a world and an identity outside of “how much he makes.” The more aware one becomes of the conditions the more alienating they become. Neither labour nor earnings nor the goods he consumes have meaning; it is the act of consuming that feels meaningful, and that’s the only world he can conceive unless he turns to nihilism. Lewis recognizes that the stories Edie tells are *the being that ought to be but isn’t, the foundation that isn’t there*.

Vattimo defines nihilism not as a pessimistic belief that all of existence is meaningless, but as a philosophical principle and ethical doctrine that there are no moral absolutes or infallible natural laws. In other words, truth is inescapably subjective. The *nihil* in nihilism points towards the dissolution of any ultimate foundation, any ultimate truth. Nihilism is therefore not the absence of meaning but a recognition of a plurality of meanings; it is not the end of civilization but the beginning of new social paradigms. Nihilism is an acknowledgement that “truth” is born in consent and from consent; there is no objective truth that any system of belief can point towards.

Edith, too, understands the curse is *nihil*—instead of the curse, there is nothing, instead of truth, there are stories, and they do not necessarily point towards the truth. She is nihilistic in that she realizes that, instead of *being*, there is the *history* in which *being* asymptotically consumes itself, dissolves, and grows weak. There is no state in which *in place of being there is nothing*;

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<sup>17</sup> Vattimo, xxix.

there is no situation where these stories are completely meaningless, nor meaningful, nor completely true or untrue. Edith has realized that they approach meaninglessness, and, unsure how to process that information, tries to face those stories, sketch her family tree, understand the curse. What she thinks she knows, what her mother took for granted to be true, she doubts—the plot of the game is to return to the house and dig until she reaches bedrock. In the end, Edith also finds stories, *what ought to be but isn't, the foundation that isn't there*.

### Why Should I?

The game's strongest narrative trick is played at the very end, when an additional layer of framing narrative is revealed. In the final moments, the player sees Edith's son Christopher laying flowers at his mother's grave. Unlike the rest of the Finch family, the grave remains unadorned. Edith has been dead for years, and the game's narrative thread was in fact Edith's son Christopher reading the stories his mother wrote.

Each story in *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a myth. Most members of the family are passively nihilistic, accepting the curse *a priori*. Playing through the game as Edith, you are primed to engage in an active nihilism, since her distance from Edie's stories challenge their validity and necessity; these are stories of neglect. *What Remains of Edith Finch* asks the player to engage in either passive or active nihilism by siding with Edie's constructed meaning or Edith's responsibility, but strongly leans towards a warning against magical thinking.

While walking across the beach and through the family graveyard, Edith questions the value of her great-grandmother's stories. The family curse is not a question for Edith in the same way it is for the player. In her narration, Edith makes it clear that Edie's belief in the stories is what makes them real. Later, when recounting her own memory of their last night in the house, she overhears Dawn say to Edie, "my children are dead because of your stories." For Edie, the deaths of Odin, Molly, Barbara, Calvin, Walter, Sam, Gregory, Gus, Milton and Lewis were not the result of reckless behaviour on her part, but the result of a supernatural force. Edie's adherence to grim fantasy passed an aversion to the

curse onto her surviving children and grandchildren, who engaged with this core belief by either accepting it wholesale, as Walt did, or denying its importance, as Dawn did. Edie is framed as the villain of this story for deferring responsibility to the curse rather than human blame, and Edith is the hero, attempting to both inform and protect her son:

“Still not sure how to tell you about all this... If we lived forever, maybe we'd have time to understand things. But as it is, I think the best we can do is try to open our eyes... and appreciate how strange and brief all of this is.”

Neither denial nor acceptance could offer freedom. To exist in this world as a Finch is to be un-free.

In our patronymic world, however, Christopher is given an advantage: he isn't a Finch. In asking us how we want to be remembered, and who does the remembering, the player is offered a chance to look to the future. For a nihilist, there is no truth, yet a nihilist must persist. The realization that nothing means anything in particular divests us from the here and now, and directs our attention to the future. Edie believes she can answer the question “what is there?” Lewis and Edith ask, “how do you know?” And in its final moments, the game asks, “why should I?”

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