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Beyond the Lookout: Language as a Tool of Deception in *Firewatch*

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ABSTRACT:
Campo Santo and Panic's *Firewatch*, the critically acclaimed first-person walking and talking simulator, presents a mystery experienced through the perspective of Henry, a middle-aged man, who assumes the role of a fire lookout as an escape from his troubled domestic life. This paper examines how the plot-twist based narrative design of *Firewatch* foregrounds the deceptive dimension of language through the two protagonists' relationship dynamics. Henry's sole source of information is his supervisor, Delilah; the central game mechanic involves communication through a walkie-talkie system. The game's discursive design is not limited to dialogue, as the game environment offers high interactivity, enabling Henry and the player to uncover details about two other significant characters – Ned, a former lookout, and his son, Brian – by perusing various notes and documents. Thus, the various clues discovered during one's playtime underscore the multifaceted uses of language in both its written and spoken forms. At the same time, the varied manifestations of language during the first half of the game do not accurately foreshadow how the second half of the story unfolds, suggesting that language – at least within the world of *Firewatch* – is a medium best described as unreliable and deceptive.

KEY WORDS:
deception, digital game, discourse, *Firewatch*, intersubjectivity, language, narrativity.

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Introduction

Campo Santo and Panic's *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) is a first-person walking and talking simulator,[1] offering adventure in the form of a mystery experienced through the eyes of Henry, a middle-aged man who takes the job of fire lookout in Shoshone National Forest as a way to escape his life at home. Throughout the game, Henry relies on his supervisor, Delilah, as his main source of information, with whom he communicates through a two-way walkie-talkie system, with the player having the ability to choose from a set of responses to Delilah's questions or comments. Dialogue – spoken language –, however, is not the only way in which language appears, as the game world is also highly interactive, allowing Henry and the player to discover information about two other prominent characters – Ned, a former lookout and the previous occupant of Henry's watchtower, and his son, Brian – through various notes and documents. As it has been noted, for example by Kagen (2018), the essence of *Firewatch* lies in "offering the player a typical game world filled with clues and suspicious situations, and Henry appears to be the threatened hero who must figure out what is wrong" (para 31; cf. Kagen, 2022). The clues that can be discovered within the game world highlight the diverse uses of language as spoken and written text, as well as the ways these media of language are manifested in intra- and extradiegetic ways, allowing the narrative's central themes of isolation and loneliness

1 Remark by the author: Relying on an expression used by the developers of *Firewatch*, Kagen (2018) writes that "*Firewatch* explicitly repurposes the visual language of a First Person Shooter in order to produce a 'talking simulator'" (para. 30).

to develop. Moreover, on the level of the relationships between the characters, the use of language culminates in feelings of distrust and abandonment, enhancing the player's emotional involvement.

The analysis adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the methods of narratological and discourse analysis as applied in digital game studies. The primary objective is to explore how *Firewatch* employs linguistic forms – both written and spoken – to structure narrative progression, mediate relationships between characters, and elicit emotional responses from the player. Following the tradition of close reading in literary and media studies, the study examines the game through its diegetic, extradiegetic, and intersubjective dimensions. Our starting point is that deception in *Firewatch* is a primarily linguistic phenomenon. Through its varied cast of characters who develop the plot in a direction that digresses from the premise set up at the beginning stages of the game, *Firewatch* suggests that language is an unreliable and deceptive medium.

The primary way in which the deceptive dimension of the different media of language becomes clear is through the development of the relationship between the two main characters, Henry and Delilah. The player controls Henry during the entirety of *Firewatch*, either through the text-based options that appear on screen at the beginning of the game or in a first-person view. In this sense, a distinctive feature of this game is that "the player is playing as Henry but is also separated from him – at once a character within the narrative and an observer outside it" (Lee, 2019). In this sense, *Firewatch* pushes the player's position as regards digital games to the extreme. Juul (2001) describes the player's position as follows: "the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game" (para. 55). There exists a strong connection between the player and Henry that gives the player the feeling that they themselves are talking to Delilah. The key to the game's success at maintaining the feel of realism, however, is that such a viewpoint necessarily entails that the extent of the player's knowledge is always limited to that of Henry's knowledge (cf. Juul, 2001). One consequence, of course, is a sense of interactivity that deeply immerses the player in the gameplay. At the same time, this also means that the emotions voiced by Henry through dialogue – him being scared, upset or suspicious of Delilah – are the same as the player is expected to experience. Thus, *Firewatch* might be said to contain elements of what Ryan (2013) terms "dramatic narrative", as "the trademark of the dramatic plot lies in its ability to create an emotional type of immersion" (p. 31) – we shall return to Ryan's analysis of the different types of narratives. According to Fyfe (2016),

> in *Firewatch*, events conspire to leave Henry underwhelmed and sad. Since the game puts players in Henry's shoes, you can see why players might feel the same. *You* [emphasis added], the game says outright in its prose prologue, *are Henry* [emphasis added]. (Fyfe, 2016, para. 5)

The analysis that follows presupposes that in *Firewatch* the player sympathises with Henry at all times, and, as a result, it is not only Henry who is deceived, but also the players themselves. At this point, the connection between the media of language and their role in the diegesis should be specified. The extradiegetic text that appears on screen at the beginning of the game prompts the player, who is not yet allowed to take control of Henry, to determine some of the details of his backstory. Textual elements are also used in intradiegetic ways and play a significant role in the story, as this is how both the player and Henry are able to navigate in the forest (using the name of the locations and other personal notes Henry adds without the player's input) and also how they are able to solve the mystery: Ned's notes and reports are part of the game's lore and as such contribute to the diegesis. Furthermore, it has been noted that "the dialogue in *Firewatch* isn't just there to just adorn or enrich the game. It *is* the game ... the heart of *Firewatch* is

conversation" (Hudson, 2016, para. 13). Dialogues between Henry and Delilah – which might be said to constitute the core game mechanic of *Firewatch* and which advance its plot[2] – enter the picture only after the text-based prologue sequence is over: this is the point in the game when spoken language begins to take precedence over its written counterpart. Similar to *Pentiment* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2022), a detective game which presents dialogue through written speech bubbles in place of spoken language (Orosz-Réti, 2025, para. 8), *Firewatch* foregrounds the relationship between linguistic medium and narrative form, albeit through a dynamic transition from textual to oral communication. If the player chooses to play with subtitles, naturally, the presence of written language becomes less subdued; however, it should be noted that this applies for the extradiegetic dimension only – the player experiences both spoken and written language, and does so simultaneously, whereas Henry is the recipient (of what Delilah says) and producer (of what he himself says) of language *solely* in its oral form. This allows us to reinterpret the previous claim about how much the player's knowledge resembles that of Henry's: diegesis-wise the player does not know more than Henry, but the player's experience of the story is more comprehensive than Henry's when it comes to the spoken and written forms of language.[3]

As this brief examination of the media of language in *Firewatch* shows, the game mechanics that are most useful for discussing the interplay of the media of language and diegesis in *Firewatch* are the dialogues that take place during Henry's time in the national forest as well as the written text that is presented via objects in the game world. The relationships between the characters of Delilah, Ned and Brian are crucial for understanding the implications of this initial observation for how language in *Firewatch* is (re)presented as an unreliable and deceptive medium. In what follows, we shall first seek to analyse Delilah's character and motivations as they are conveyed to Henry and the player through dialogue and the game's narrative design.

Spoken Language: Delilah's Deception and the Narrative Design of *Firewatch*

Taking after her Biblical namesake, Delilah frequently manipulates Henry's emotions by withholding information or giving him false leads. On the first day of Henry's new job, she admits to drinking the night Henry arrived at his lookout tower. Her behaviour is misleading, even at the beginning of the game, as on the second day she pauses her conversation with Henry to take a call with another lookout, although, unbeknownst to her, Henry is able to listen in and hears her say "no, I don't think he has any idea" (Campo Santo, 2016). The player has the option to confront her about the call, to which she responds by saying that the "call was work" and that "it's not really your [Henry's] business" (Campo Santo, 2016). The fact that after this she ignores Henry for some time – something which might happen at other points of the game as well – gives the player the impression early on that

2 Remark by the author: In this respect, *Firewatch* may be viewed as a counterpoint to games such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), in which verbal and written communication is deliberately minimised. As Bülgözdi (2024) observes, *Journey* "removes the limitations that narration would pose on the player's perception of their surroundings" (p. 72).

3 Remark by the author: Time is also a factor for the player, who has a limited time to respond to Delilah. Domsch (2013) calls this phenomenon "timed dialogue trees" (p. 38), citing *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) and *Sakura Wars* (Red Entertainment et al., 1996-2019) as examples.

she is careless with the way she handles information, is prone to mood-swings and is, in general, unreliable.[4] According to Sean Vanaman, one of the writers of *Firewatch*, in this scene, "she's just doing her job. She's just literally just talking to someone else. And the lens of what you hear it [through] 100 percent is Henry's paranoia" (Sasser, 2021, p. 43). Later, when it is revealed that someone has been tracking Henry and eavesdropping on his and Delilah's radio conversations, the player can similarly confront Delilah about her working against him. Anytime Henry mentions informing the authorities, Delilah is reluctant, even though Henry is the last person who has seen two teenage girls who have gone missing and there are clear signs that she and Henry are being stalked by someone. She cites "saving [themselves] the trouble" and lack of proof as the reasons, respectively (Campo Santo, 2016). Although Delilah appears to reluctantly comply with Henry's wishes regarding vaguely mentioning him having seen the girls, at the end of the game it is revealed that she chose to remain quiet to keep her comfortable position at work: "I filed a report that said neither of us ever talked to or saw those girls" because "[I] didn't want to be hassled" (Campo Santo, 2016). As she tells Henry, she did the same in Brian Goodwin's case: lookouts are not allowed to have their children with them, and in a report she had lied about Brian not being there with his father, Ned. Instances like these solidify her position in the narrative as that of an untrustworthy character.

While at times the good intentions behind her actions seem to be dubious, during the course of *Firewatch* Delilah *does* guide Henry: the central game mechanic involves the player pressing the keyboard shortcut necessary to access Henry's walkie-talkie, which, via the game's interface, the player is able to point at objects scattered around the in-game environment, making them the topic of conversation. It should be noted that the information Delilah provides upon interacting with objects is often crucial, such as when Henry learns from her that Brian was the owner of a backpack he comes across by coincidence. At other times, she can be consulted to gain some supplementary information about the game world. Fyfe (2016) writes that "*Firewatch* certainly rewards exploration, but its narrative rarely encourages it" (para. 13). For example, Henry can ask Delilah about a granola bar he finds in one of the first supply caches, and she says it would probably give him food poisoning – information that is, at its core, deceptive, as no such game mechanic exists. A further example is when Delilah advises Henry to take pictures of the incriminating evidence he encounters via Brian's disposable camera, introducing a new gameplay feature via the diegesis. This kind of use of UI falls under what Andrews (2010) categorises as *diegetic UI*. Ultimately, however, this has no real effect on the way the narrative unfolds and on the extradiegetic level results in the player necessarily wasting the limited amount of screenshot opportunities with which they are provided.

Even though the player can decide to alert the authorities about Henry being the last person who has come into contact with the two teenage girls, the game's linear narrative provides no real choice in the matter – in this sense, *Firewatch* resembles traditional fiction. Indeed, the game lacks the kind of player-prompted consequences that arise as a result of having more than one possible branch of story progression (Mitchell et al. [2020] categorise *Firewatch* as having non-causal game consequences): "We control [Henry's] actions and decisions only to the extent that the predetermined context and narrative allows" (Lee, 2019). The beginning of the game intercuts an interactive text narrative with

4 Remark by the author: One of the observation reports Henry can pick up uses the word "reliable" to describe both him and Delilah, even though she is anything but. In the context of the present study, this detail adds another layer of complexity: the player has no reason to assume that the reports produced by Ned are not telling the truth (Ned made them for his own personal use); however, Ned's own judgement might be flawed, making him an unreliable observer. This, then, means that Ned's unreliability is part of the larger, overarching storyline that is based on misleading the player.

non-text gameplay. During the latter, the player gains control of Henry for short periods of time, for instance helping him load his backpack into his truck and then leaving the truck at the edge of the woods. Mitchell et al. (2020) write that the player's choices during the flashback text-sequence are "likely to impact the 'present'" (para. 64), but in this specific case, the player lacks the control to make any impactful choices (Henry will always date Julia, and she will invariably be diagnosed with younger onset dementia). The player does not gain full control of Henry until the title card has appeared. Thus, a pattern is established that is to remain until the end of the game: the player can control the present time of the narrative (when Henry is a fire lookout) to *some degree*, but not the characters' past or future. Additionally, all of the events are meticulously pre-scripted in terms of the sequence in which they happen, such as when, on the second day, Delilah asks Henry to check out some illegal fireworks. To do so, Henry has to use rope to get around. Spatial limitations also become apparent to the player early on: rope, alongside overgrown foliage, is one of the ways in which the game limits which parts of the map can be accessed – areas are unlocked as the story progresses.

To gain a deeper understanding of how *Firewatch*'s narrative design intertwines with its use of language and how these aspects are related to the character of Delilah, we will analyse the game through the lens of various game studies-oriented theories of narrativity. Hidalgo (2016a) observes that "the dialog choices feel natural and impactful, but outside of when the story lets you, you lack agency" (para. 9). This tension between player freedom and authorial control is precisely what Jenkins (2004) identifies in his discussion of interactive narratives: "a mixture of enacted[5] and embedded narrative elements can allow for a balance between the flexibility of interactivity and the coherence of a preauthored narrative" (p. 127). We would like to suggest that the narrative of *Firewatch* is a prime example of the embedded narratives Jenkins (2004) describes. In embedded narratives, "the game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory palace" (p. 126), an approach which "relies on the player to ascertain a narrative via context clues, textual cues, and artifacts that are loaded with meaning" (Penabella, 2015, para. 10).[6] As this study shall argue, in the case of *Firewatch* it is precisely this encoded meaning that deceives the player, and the deception itself is significant because it occurs in the context of a mystery-solving, detective story kind of narrative. In her survey of the correlation between plot types and interactive narratives, Ryan (2013; cf. Bényei, 2000) writes that epistemic narratives (mystery stories) are

> challenging the reader to find the solution before it is given out by the narrative; in order to do so, the reader needs to sort out the clues from the accidental facts, and to submit these clues to logical operations of deduction and induction. (Ryan, 2013, p. 25)

This is what *Firewatch* players are engaging in on an extradiegetic level, while the game is also an example of how

> the classical embedded narrative would be a detective story, such as those found in adventure games, where players encounter a world of clues that have to be deciphered in order to find out about the story that has already happened. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024, p. 233)

As it has been previously mentioned, the core game mechanic related to language in *Firewatch* is dialogue. Specifically, the game might also be viewed as an example of what Domsch (2013) terms the "arborescent" type of dialogue tree: "every dialogue option

5 Remark by the author: Jenkins (2004) defines enacted narratives as narratives where "the story itself may be structured around the player's movement through space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate that plot trajectory" (p. 129).

6 Remark by the author: The epistemic narratives Ryan (2013) describes function much in the same way.

chosen will disable all other options, while potentially opening up a new set of options" (pp. 39). As Domsch also notes:

> Often, dialogue choices will have less of a direct consequence on the events that result from the conversation, than on the player's (also narratively relevant) perception on the character she is playing. A dialogue tree might offer different answers leading to the same narrative result, but differing in tone and therefore characterizing the player character in different ways. (Domsch, 2013, p. 40)

In *Firewatch*, the player can generally choose from three options; however, these choices either have the same consequence on the level of the narrative, or they are referenced at a later point but do not crucially define the way events play out. For instance, the player can choose between three names to decide what to call the biggest fire of the year, and towards the end of the game Delilah will refer to the fire using that name. Thus, the player experiences a high degree of interactivity, but, more often than not, this is not translated into agency – a typical 'issue' for which walking simulators have been criticised. The player's lack of choice during gameplay is a typical characteristic of walking simulators: "the player of a walking sim is often unable to exert agency, change the story, or perform mastery … Their mechanics force a player into relative passivity" (Kagen, 2018, para. 13; cf. Kagen, 2022). Macklin and Sharp (2016) use the concept of *space of possibility* to refer to the variety or reduced number of possible actions the player has. In this way, the walking simulator genre appears to contradict how, according to Stuart (2015), people turn to digital games to have a sense of full interactive control (agency). In general, while playing digital games "the expectation of consequence is what keeps players motivated to make choices – if nothing results from my actions, or decisions for actions, why make them in the first place?" (Domsch, 2013, p. 137). As regards *Firewatch*, we cannot think of consequences in the traditional sense of something that impacts either the narrative, storyworld, or both. Yet, the player can have a satisfying game experience. As Murray (2018) points out:

> Dramatic agency is … unrelated to whether or not we can change the events of the story, since we can experience narrative anticipation and pleasure in a navigational choice, such as from one point of view to another in a story made up of fixed events. (Murray, 2018, p. 11)

The gradual development of Henry's relationship with Delilah consists of fixed events, although we always see events play out from Henry's point of view. On the second day, the discovery of the telephone line having been cut foreshadows Henry's later realisation that he and Delilah are completely alone in the wilderness and thus are reliant on each other: in a sense, he has no option but to trust Delilah if he wants to ensure his survival,[7] no matter how ambiguous her intentions seem to be – at its core, her position is that of a helper (see Ryan, 2013). The turning point of their relationship from this point of view is the conversation towards the end of the game when the player can make Delilah promise to wait for Henry; however, as part of the predetermined narrative which characterises what Juul

7 Remark by the author: After discovering Ned's notes at the government camp, Henry has a breakdown, during which he accuses Delilah of not being real, making this a climactic moment of the paranoia and existential doubt that he has been experiencing. In describing the game's ability to unnerve but provide comfort to the player at the same time, Hidalgo (2016b) observes that the reason why Henry is "an easy character to relate to" (para. 9) is that he is "just a guy, out in the woods, chattering on a radio, strikingly human" (para. 10) and that "he only panics if the player does. The woods move around him, noises come from all directions, but Henry's only as paranoid as his player" (para. 7). This study is attempting to argue for the opposite: Henry already exhibits signs of paranoia, which are then experienced by the player through taking up his perspective.

terms "progression games",[8] she leaves anyway, telling Henry that a team will meet him at the evacuation point in the North – by this stage, the player might have completely lost their trust in Delilah, and, consequently, their hope of escaping the burning forest.[9] Henry's relationship with Delilah functions in a similar way to how the player relates to the two characters of *Façade* (Procedural Arts, 2005): "while [the player's] agency allows variations in the dialogue that exposes diverse facets of Grace and Tripp's personalities, the drama unfolds according to a relatively fixed script imposed top-down by the system" (Ryan, 2013, p. 32; cf. Murray, 2018). Additionally, the player has the option of not accepting Delilah's help to unlock an alternative ending – the only instance when the story branches and when the game offers the player true freedom of choice *and* a choice with real consequences, deviating from what Kagen (2018) terms "forced-choice mechanics" (para. 15) and "narrative railroading" (para. 17). If Henry approaches but does not enter the helicopter, it takes off without him, stranding him in the burning forest and most probably leading to his death, in this way letting Henry have a final chance of his own at misleading Delilah.

The fact that the player might choose to respond encouragingly to Delilah's flirting is another way in which *Firewatch* might be viewed as a progression game. Delilah expresses interest in Henry while they witness "'what might be the biggest fire of the year'", saying that "connecting with" Henry has been "really nice" and "it'd be nice to be close to someone" (Campo Santo, 2016). Cissy Jones, the voice of Delilah, said the following in an interview about her character's role in Henry's life:

> I think Delilah can be whoever you want/need her to be. If you need a confidant, friend, potential romance, or just an ambivalent contact, and it's aided by the fact that you don't know what she looks like. It's entirely up to you and the interactions you choose to have with her. (Fyfe, 2015, para. 51)

The fact that Delilah takes a liking to Henry might be explained by their similar backstories and the unique circumstances of their jobs: both of them have left behind or fled from a significant other (in Delilah's case, her boyfriend; in Henry's case, his wife) when coming to the forest and have, for the most part, only each other for company. During their last conversation, if the player chooses the dialogue option which has Henry ask if Delilah would like to visit him after he escapes the forest fire, she says she will "maybe ... come by" but then adds "I think you should go to Julia. ... You gotta go see her" (Campo Santo, 2016), meaning that she is rejecting Henry and has, essentially, led on both Henry and the player. Despite Delilah's flirting, at the end of the game Henry "doesn't even get the consolation prize of winning Delilah, the game's princess stand-in" (Kagen, 2018, para. 2), and in this way the ending is "subvert[ing] generic expectations" (Kagen, 2018, para. 51). As this and

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8 Remark by the author:In a pure progression game, the player is simply presented with a series of challenges where all of the options and solutions have been *explicitly described in the game rules* [emphasis added]. ... In progression structures, the player is occasionally afforded some freedom to roam an environment with the only interesting experiences to be had in one direction. (Juul, 2002, p. 326)

Firewatch seems to be a perfect example of Juul's last point: although there is a story to be followed and a mystery to be solved, the player is allowed to freely roam the map of the game world, putting the story on hold without any consequences (after completing the game for the first time, a free-roam mode becomes available especially for this purpose). Since *Firewatch* does not feature any time-restricted events, this exploration-friendly game mechanic actually benefits the player, who might get lost while navigating the forest.

9 Remark by the author: This study deals with those occasions when Delilah is intentionally misleading Henry *or* telling him information that makes sense in the game world, but which has no implemented consequences, such as in the case of the granola bar and the disposable camera. One unintentional instance is when, early in the game, Henry encounters the two teenage girls. Delilah tells him that they are known for causing trouble; however, as the game progresses it becomes clear that the girls are innocent, and it is Ned who cut the telephone line. Another example is that, despite having worked as a fire lookout for years, Delilah does not know everything about the forest. She is surprised when Henry encounters a chain link fence. Several aspects of the mystery are introduced "using Delilah's ignorance of the clues" (Ben Again, 2024).

the previous examples highlight, the character of Delilah as a whole and especially the way she uses language in dialogue are one way in which the narrative of *Firewatch* misdirects the player: it builds up the possibility of a romantic relationship between the two main characters, only to, as possibly symbolised by the forest going up in flames, stifle its development at the very end. Delilah's unenthusiastic answer to Henry's proposition might suggest that she does not plan to contact him ever again (Fyfe, 2016), preferring to process the unusual experience they shared on her own. Meanwhile the disappointment we might assume Henry feels mirrors the player's own potential disappointment when witnessing this scene.

Written Language: Ned and Brian's Role in the Evasive Mystery

In his review, Hidalgo (2016a) also writes that "as a narrative, *Firewatch* is beautiful. It's twists and dark corners are a wonderful vehicle for anxiety, and provide astounding gravity to the plot" (para. 9). Hidalgo is referring to how the narrative of this game is built around a series of conspiracies that are devised and solved by the characters,[10] and, as a result, by the player.[11] The final parts of the game end up "dissolving any grand conspiratorial mystery into personal tragedy" (Lee, 2019; cf. Kagen, 2018). Put simply, "there is no conspiracy, only a sad man who probably killed his son" (Fyfe, 2016, para 24) – in Henry's words, "we found out an old lookout killed his only son and decided to become a lonely hermit" (Campo Santo, 2016) –, therefore the government conspiracy storyline within the bait and switch style plot might be understood as the anti-climax of the narrative (Fyfe, 2016). What is most important for the purposes of the present enquiry, however, is that the way *Firewatch* builds up the ending through the objects located in the game world can also be regarded as an example of the deceptive use of language. This is because the clues found during the first half of the game point towards a different kind of narrative than that which eventually unfolds, although in this case, deception is realised not primarily through the different dialogue options but rather through the interactive environment. Throughout the game, Henry discovers various notes and scientific reports, which, to him and Delilah at least, suggest that the fenced in area called Wapiti Station is the site of a project secretly run by the government; however, as one document states, in reality the place is a research station for local wildlife. The information in most of these documents about the nature of the research is vague, creating a sense of uncertainty, mistrust and suspense that adds to the game's overall atmosphere of isolation. On the other hand, upon returning to the lake, the player discovers that everything Henry and Delilah have talked about since his arrival has been transcribed word for word by Ned, meaning that they are not as lonely

10 Remark by the author: "In *Firewatch*, because the conspiracy actually is so minor, Henry and Delilah are able to work through it, grasp its dimensions and identify the rational, boring answer to each of its questions" (Fyfe, 2016, para 23).

11 Remark by the author: Remark by the author: *Firewatch* players have come up with several theories, including ones which suggest that Delilah has been more than just deceptive: she might be lying to Henry in order to cover up the evidence that she has been working with Ned all along. One example of this could be the fact that she does not want to report the missing girls not only because she does not want to risk losing her job, but also because she does not want to have the area searched in case it could disclose Ned's involvement (see S/\GI, 2016).

as they and the player first thought. Ned's transcriptions have important implications for the game's handling of the oral and written forms of language: we might suppose that in transforming spoken words into writing, Ned is exposing language to a fallacious process, in the sense that such a process invariably involves the loss of paralinguistic qualities of speech,[12] leading to loss of meaning. Additionally, one of the reports Henry finds describes him as a person is "susceptible to influence" (Campo Santo, 2016). If we regard Henry as a potential stand-in for the player,[13] the risk of being manipulated applies for the player as well: they are, at every step, being manipulated along with Henry (cf. Fyfe, 2016), because "humans are good at … finding patterns that justify their narratives" (Lee, 2019). In this case, the patterns have to do with the characters' attempt at finding the (linguistic) means to construct a narrative about a non-existent government conspiracy: once Henry informs Delilah of his findings, it is mostly at her urging that they come up with the theory of being at the centre of the government's surveillance efforts. Hence, not only Delilah's misleading assumptions, but several other diegetic aspects, too, add to *Firewatch*'s underlying theme of deception.

Besides Delilah, the player is forced to question the motives of another character, Ned. The second key relationship of the game unfolds in the background, via a retelling of past events – this is to be expected given *Firewatch*'s epistemic, pseudo-detective narrative. As Ryan (2013) notes, "the trademark of the epistemic plot is the superposition of two stories: one constituted by the events that took place in the past, and the other by the investigation that leads to their discovery" (p. 25). This also explains why any in-game mention of past events is tightly intertwined with growing feelings of paranoia for both Henry and the player. *Firewatch* poses an interesting question as regards the genre of the narrative: the pseudo-mystery is mixed with hints of humour and horror. As Henry exits the cave system that he was forced to explore in order to return to his watchtower after having dealt with the teenagers, he is blinded by a flashlight. By clicking the option to "report [the] creepy guy" (Campo Santo, 2016), the player can tell Delilah about the strange man (who turns out to be Ned). In response, Delilah quips that "'bumping into someone in the middle of nowhere is part of the fun'" (Campo Santo, 2016). "Delilah is the perfect way to break tension in this game" (Ben Again, 2024). Having returned to his tower, Henry finds his typewriter on the ground at the base of the stairs leading to his tower. The player becomes aware that Henry is being stalked; however, a note reveals that it was the teenagers who broke into his tower, not Ned. Weeks later, Henry finds a clipboard with exact quotes from conversations he has had with Delilah. There is a slight jump scare in the form of Henry being hit on the head from behind near the lake (which the player experiences from a first-person perspective), but the clipboard is gone when he comes to himself. Adding to the tension is the fact that Henry comes across a snowmobile that has been

12 Remark by the author: For an in-depth study of the paralinguistic qualities of speech, see the chapter titled "The effects of vocal cues that accompany spoken words" by Knapp et al. (2013).

13 Remark by the author: This is most visible at the end, when the character of Henry in a metaphorical way merges with the figure of the player: once Henry gets in the helicopter to escape the burning forest, the credits start rolling, enabling the player to likewise leave behind the forest and exit the game. On the other hand, it should be noted that we cannot regard Henry as an avatar for the player: the purpose of the text-based prologue is to outline his backstory, which then facilitates the player's decision making during the rest of the game (at the time of making the choices which compose Henry's backstory the player did not have much information on which to base these choices [see Mitchell et al., 2020]). When the player gains control of Henry, he is already a fully developed character. Additionally, in Fyfe's (2016) reading, rather than merging Henry and the player, in its ending scenes "*Firewatch* decoupl[es] the player from Henry … You are with Henry only as long as he distracts himself from his actual life. He grew close to Delilah and will never see her again, and the same is true of you" (para. 26). This enables Fyfe (2016) to redefine what it means for the player to continually identify with Henry's perspective: "Contrary to what *Firewatch* says in its opening, you're not Henry. Not really. Henry has his problems. They're not yours. Henry has to face them on his own. Maybe you do too" (para. 27).

ransacked for parts, and his radio call with Delilah is interrupted by someone coughing. When Delilah confesses that she lied in her report about them never having encountered the teenage girls, she is devastated that there exist transcripts of her and Henry discussing about covering it up. When Henry investigates Wapiti Station, he finds various devices related to surveillance, and as he leaves, someone sets fire to the station. The next day, while he is out in the forest at night, Delilah warns him about a man standing in his tower. Heading there, Henry finds a tape recording of him and Delilah discussing burning down the forest, framing them as the perpetrators, while the next day someone makes a call in Henry's name, claiming that Delilah knows the reason for the forest fire. Henry is forced to investigate the locked-off part of the cave after the door to it slams shut behind him: he finds a shoe, Brian's hideout and his decomposing body. At the end of the game, Ned is revealed to have been the person behind the mystery: he did everything so that Henry and Delilah would not find out about Brian's fate.

Ned's character embodies deception in three ways. Firstly, Delilah implies (depending on which option the player chooses to respond with to one of her questions) that he might have staged his own son's death to appear to be a caving accident, meaning that he took advantage of his son's trust in him. As the relationship between Ned and his son is portrayed as strained due to Ned being a bad father, this interpretation seems quite probable. The possibility of such calculated plans for murder is not the only occasion of him plotting against others, as after he knocks out Henry by the lake, Henry picks up a clipboard listing Ned's ideas, including his plan to "pit [Henry and Delilah] against each other" (Campo Santo, 2016). In Ned's hideout, a report on Henry states that he "would not be missed if removed" (Campo Santo, 2016), hinting that Ned might have been capable of killing Henry to ensure that his secret would be safe. Delilah reveals that Ned is suffering from PTSD related to his time in the military and came to the forest to escape his troubles – just like Delilah and Henry are also there to avoid (taking responsibility for) painful personal situations, and how, by the end of the game, all characters flee the scene. Ned's mental state, however, appears to be more unstable compared to that of the other two characters. Secondly, ever since Brian's death, Ned has been "holding himself in abject terror of human civilization" (Fyfe, 2016, para. 25). He has been living in isolation, hiding in the forest from the authorities, probably due to feeling ashamed of himself. This, too, could suggest being guilty of murder: if he was innocent, he would have no need to try to dodge the questioning of the authorities, although, as he tells Henry in a tape recording, "I thought about going back, having to answer questions and having to get him put into the ground, and I didn't see the point" (Campo Santo, 2016). The game leaves it to the player to decide whether they believe Ned's or Delilah's interpretation of Brian's death. Finally, from the point of view of the complete game experience, the plotline involving Ned and Brian is the true mystery. The reports Henry finds in the abandoned fenced-in research station have been written and placed there by Ned, who counted on Henry being able to figure out how to get in. As the notes in Ned's hideout explain, he used Henry and Delilah's theory of the government observing them to his own advantage, hoping this would drive them away and keep his secret safe. Ned's intent to deceive is also visible in him ruining the campsite of the teenagers and leaving a letter in their name for Henry (saying they cut the communication line to get revenge for him warning them to put out their campfire). Henry and Delilah coming up with the government surveillance theory as well as everything connected to Ned's character were all implemented by the developers as a decoy, to mislead the player.

The ending of *Firewatch* is ambiguous not only in the case of Henry and Delilah's relationship – the player is also left without definite answers when it comes to Julia's and Ned's future. The storyline involving Julia is pushed into the background, as after the prologue

it does not have an impact on the rest of the game's events. Supposing Henry gets in the helicopter, he does manage to escape; however, Ned runs off at the end of the game, and without external help, the chances of him surviving the forest fire are low. Furthermore, it is also uncertain whether the truth about the circumstances of Brian's death and the location of his body would ever reach the outside world. According to Kagen (2022), "in Walking Sims, you're cleaning up the story with your feet. And often, you're doing the memory work involved in emotionally tidying up the story of a corpse's life" (p. 11). *Firewatch*, however, is less straightforward. There is no way to use the evidence the player collects in the form of documents, tape recordings and via the disposable camera, even though the player might be expecting an official investigation at the end of the game, perhaps similar in style to the text-based prologue at the beginning of the game. Even if Ned survived, he would most likely continue to keep his knowledge of the events a secret. Fyfe (2016) writes:

> While the answers Henry finds are more mundane than he expected, he does get answers. He actually closes two missing person cases. But this mystery game doesn't end with Henry – or the player – receiving any recognition for solving the mystery. Delilah is too unsettled about her culpability in Brian's death to commend Henry for his investigative work. (Fyfe, 2016, para. 15)

Depending on how the player handles Henry's dialogue options, he can express preference for contacting the authorities about the existence of the documents showing Ned's surveillance efforts at the government compound, leaving open the possibility of him sharing what he knows and thus gaining recognition for having solved the mystery. However, this could only happen at the expense of exposing Ned (who might have murdered Brian) and Delilah (who has been, for the entirety of the game, against contacting the authorities for fear of losing her job, and, possibly, for fear of being found guilty of involvement). Henry, having newly arrived, in contrast to Delilah who has been part of the fire watch for a longer time, is less implicated in the events that took place – he is, for all intents and purposes, an outsider. Moreover, after having found Ned's hideout, he would be able to provide sufficient evidence to prove his innocence, making it likely that he would, in fact, share the details. Delilah's surprise is genuine in the scene where Henry finds Brian's body and the game has her contemplate revealing the truth: "Now I've got to decide whether I tell people that he's down there so they can retrieve the body or not. And if I do, I'm going to be asked about Ned Goodwin" (Campo Santo, 2016). Delilah's hesitation in this scene and her behaviour leading up to this point seem to suggest that once she and Henry go their separate ways, she is not planning to reveal the truth and instead will keep on being ambiguous and misleading. Her refusal to face the past and her tendency to flee once the situation gets complicated is part of the larger theme of running away from one's problems that is also present in *Firewatch*: "everyone in *Firewatch* has something to do that they aren't doing. Everyone's avoiding what's hard" (Fyfe, 2016, para. 11). Regardless, Delilah – who, in Fyfe's (2016) words, is a "complete flake" (para. 16) – might be viewed as the epitome of the way deceptive language in *Firewatch* leads to loneliness and abandonment: if it were up to her, Brian would remain lying at the bottom of the cave, his death unacknowledged.

Conclusion

Firewatch is a game that makes effective use of the potentially deceptive nature of both spoken and written language to create a compelling narrative and an immersive gaming experience, where the player tackles a mystery by taking on the role of Henry,

a newly recruited fire lookout. The lines of dialogue between him and his supervisor, Delilah, are deceptive to a great extent, contributing to his increasing uncertainty, distrust and paranoia – emotions which not only permeate the game world, but, importantly, are also experienced by the player. Thus, Delilah is the character who best exemplifies the potential for misdirection that language carries within itself. While some of the dialogue between Henry and Delilah arises on its own, the highly interactive environment offered by the game opens up further possibilities. The government conspiracy that, in the form of various documents, is hinted at for much of the game turns out to be a false lead: instead, the real mystery is centred around a previous lookout's son, Brian, who himself suffered the consequences of falling victim to deception. His father, Ned – a former lookout Delilah is familiar with due to his having been stationed in the forest three years prior to Henry's arrival – might be viewed as a further embodiment of deception: his project involves perpetuating the existence of a government conspiracy, trying to conceal Brian's death and hiding his own presence in the forest, which for some time he manages to succeed at by manipulating Henry and Delilah.

Firewatch "is a game where you get to dictate the fate of two people who make a lot of mistakes in their past" (Ben Again, 2024); however, ultimately, the deceptive ending of the narrative is pre-determined by the writers. Firstly, Henry and Delilah can never meet in person and cannot enter a romantic relationship either. Secondly, although *Firewatch* appears to morph into a detective narrative, a fundamental aspect of the genre – that of questioning people (the witnesses or suspects), is not an option. Clues for solving the mystery, for the most part, take the form of written language. In fact, neither Henry nor Delilah ever communicate with Ned directly – the closest Henry gets is listening to a tape recording left for him by Ned while he is headed to Ned's hideout. From the signs of the teenagers' presence to Ned's stalking to Delilah's voice being carried via radio signal, communication in *Firewatch* is, if not indirect, then, on the whole, mediated through various forms of language and media. Notably, the game ends with an emphasis on written language: Delilah hints at Henry writing about his experience, but the player cannot be sure just how much Henry would reveal of the truth. Ultimately, dialogues, objects within the game world and the plotline all point towards the unreliability that may characterise language depending on the how deceptive the person producing that language intends to be.

By foregrounding deception as both a narrative device and a design principle, *Firewatch* demonstrates how language can shape player perception and agency. The game's tightly scripted illusion of choice invites players to question not only what is being said but also what is being withheld, suggesting that limited agency can itself serve a meaningful narrative function. For game designers, this highlights the potential of linguistic manipulation and constrained interactivity to evoke emotional complexity and moral ambiguity. In turn, players are prompted to reflect on their role as interpreters within a mediated world – reminding us that, in narrative games, understanding is always contingent and partial, but, even more importantly, it is shaped by the language through which it is conveyed.

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