

Agency and Interactivity in the Narrative Video Game 'What Remains of Edith Finch'; Exploring Rita Felski's

In 2020 the scholar Rita Felski published the monograph *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Here, she examines the emotional attachment between works of art and the public. She argues that the scholars are often expected to practice detachment from the object of study. Specially after these last decades of critical theory, be it socially inflected in critical gender or race theory—to mention two—or rather towards the linguistic turn, poststructuralism, etc., it seemed that a distance from the artwork was compulsory in order to achieve the fullest and truest understanding possible. A tradition of reading against the grain, suspicion or even, as Felski calls it, paranoia, took root.

However, she considers this detachment false. There's always attachment to something. Perhaps to the work itself, and that's the reason it made it into the syllabus or the paper. Or perhaps the scholar feels a strong attachment to a theoretical framework or a set of values. Felski takes up the concept of situated knowledge and calls on the analysis of attachment to encourage the literary scholar to ponder on the intertwining of feeling and thought in the interpretive work.

So, in *Hooked*, she theorizes attachment and offers some tools of analysis. Felski suggests that attachment happens attunement to the artwork, which is a felt affinity and does not mean an escapist rupture with the world by withdrawing into an aesthetic interiority, but a phenomenon in touch with life and the world, of things coming together. To analyse this attunement, Felski uses the concept of identification, which is not only to a given character but to a much broader range of things. A style, a political stance, a composite of author-novel. Identification can happen in several ways and so Felski offers four modes of identification:

- **Alignment:** the way the work itself encourages us to become attuned to a given character, be it because they are the narrator themselves or because their whole point is to direct our attention to the main character, like Watson makes us marvel at Sherlock.
- **Recognition:** happens when the reader feels mirrored by a character or some other aspect of the work. This moment of recognizing oneself does not need to be a complacent moment or unreflective, as other authors have argued. We may easily find ourselves in a negative trait we don't wish and be prompt into reflection.
- **Allegiance:** the political and moral stance of the work agrees with our own convictions.
- **Empathy:** refers to a co-feeling, a sharing of feelings of the character, situation or voice, although the concept of empathy is weighed by class and gender tensions, as privilege and expectations related to empathy are unevenly distributed.

So this attachment, which comes from attunement and works through identification, can have an impact in the way scholars carry out their research and teaching. The acknowledgement and analysis of attachment with a guiding reading ethos—with a certain orientation towards the artwork at hand. As opposed to the detachment affected in the last decades—that constant decoding and reading against the grain of critical theory—she calls for an openness to the text. Receptivity instead of suspicion, giving the text the benefit of the doubt and allowing its message to be conveyed rather than keeping one's guard up. In the classroom, Felski's methodology is

meant to foster an atmosphere of appreciation and openness, even to texts whose characteristics don't easily engender attunement in the student, who might find it does not align with their values or seems simply arid. She explains that the teacher needs to make the student care about certain issues, styles or topics as part of their training—that is, to foster a kind of reading that encourages relating and becoming attached to previously rather unlikable things.

As part of scholarly production, on the other hand, following the lines of attachment can also be a productive starting point, which is what I'll explore in this paper.

Although Felski refers most consistently to literature in her monograph, I have not chosen a piece of literature but a narrative videogame, namely *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Felski applies her methodology to literature, music and films to demonstrate its versatility and, although they are not explicitly mentioned, video games can also benefit from this theoretical framework. *What Remains* was first released in 2017 for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, and on following years also for other platforms. It was developed by Giant Sparrow, an indie company, under the creative direction and writing of Ian Dallas. It has won 8 awards, including Best Game at the 2018 British Academy Games Awards, and most other awards in the best narrative category, and was nominated over 30 times in several categories between 2017 and 2018.

It is a 1st person exploration game in which Edith Finch, a 17-year-old girl who comes back to her family home after moving away years before. The house is now empty, but 5 generations have lived there and Edie, her great grandmother, had made sure each member left a trace. You can see the hazardous sprawling climb of the house over the trees. As the owner of each room died, it was locked, left untouched, and a small shrine with a picture and some kind of written document retelling the circumstances of their death was assembled. Because death has been taking the members of this family all too soon, most branches are cut short. The family has a curse, we are told at the beginning, and Edith is hoping to figure it out. So, she walks along the house to rediscover the life of its former inhabitants. As she finds each of the shrines, a short game is activated that dramatizes the moment of their death. It's most typically a piece also in the 1st person that reflects the perspective and personality of each character. Although they differ in style and genre, magic realism permeated the whole video game.

So, on to the analysis. What would it look like to practice Felski's openness to attachment?

What Remains of Edith Finch is a game I am openly attached to. It is, to my taste, aesthetically beautiful, the story is thoughtfully well-paced, and the characters captivating. However, in the middle of the game, there was for me a moment of strong detachment. A rupture in attachment is as suitable for Felski's approach as an instance of actual attachment.

Of all the family members in the Finch family, the story that sat most uncomfortably with me was that of Barbara Finch, the child star, and the narrator's great grand aunt. Her story is told in a horror comic-book. As we leaf through the pages and play out some sections, we learn that she has been briefly famous as a child as the protagonist of monster films due to her marvellous scream. However, her career did not continue as she got older and we are introduced to a 16 year old girl who is not very successful neither in her studies nor professionally. She's invited to a horror film fans event and as she tries to rehearse her signature scream, she finds it hasn't quite survived puberty. She is practicing with her boyfriend on a Halloween night, only her little brother in the house with them, when Barbara and her boyfriend Rick fight and she kicks him out. In the meantime, a radio transistor is warning of a group of monsters that are terrorizing the streets. It appears that one of the members in this monster group has entered her house,

she defends herself and he trips against the 1st floor banister. However, when she walks down the stairs, the body is gone and the doorbell rings. I'll play now a two-minute video with the end of her story.

It is up to the player to consider whether it was her boyfriend the one to kill her, or whether a mob really attacked her. The narrator says that her fans had a taste for fame too, implying her fans killed her for the glory too. And implies that "poor boyfriend" got blamed with the crime even though he disappeared on the same night, perhaps victim of the same group. Nevertheless, I interpret, if the group was so well spotted that the radio was talking about them live on that night, they would have been suspect of the murder, not just blame it on the missing young man. Furthermore, the young man is described as her fan number 1. My reading is that the boyfriend was the murderer, since throughout the game, once the fantasy elements were set aside, the stories had all the information to be understood in a realistic way.

The moment of detachment was due to mis-allegiance. As a feminist with the due training in critical gender theory, it felt jarring that the account takes the spotlight away from the likely murderer. Perhaps even worst, there's a special kind of victim-blaming in the way she is frivolously portrayed to enjoy her own murder and think of the fame it would bring her in the final moments. While I still felt very attuned to the narrative and visual style, this sudden friction with my politics and moral compass was almost knee-jerk reaction. I should also say that this is the only murder. All other deaths are due to illness or accidents. At this point, it would be easy to cross out the game as complicit with gendered violence, and one could possibly dig out other subtler signs of misogyny that would ultimately add together to discredit this game on feminist grounds. In fact, even the narrator of the game wonders why her great grandmother had chosen such version of the story to remember her daughter. Her reflection in the end, that perhaps her great grandmother was just seeing a happy ending when she chose that retelling, doesn't seem to quite compensate the disservice done to Barbara.

However, Felski's approach is to allow the work to speak to us in its own terms, set our reticence aside for just long enough to appreciate another perspective. The narrator, after all, has a point. Imagining that Barbara somehow found realization even in her end might be a kind of relief to her grieving mother on the one hand. On the other hand, it echoes the spirit of all the other accounts. Death is, throughout *What Remains*, inevitable. However, whether from the naïve point of view of a child or the delirious mind of a mentally ill person, all characters experience a sense of achievement. A liberatory moment. For example, one of the children, who has a fatal accident on the swing in the garden, was feeling he was going to reach the moon and finally become an astronaut, or a baby who drowns at the bath felt he was happily playing with a frog in a pond and actually becomes a frog who could swim so well. In the light of a death that's inevitable, there's a deep sense of hope, magic and even happiness. Nobody brought their death onto themselves, but in a way, all these characters died doing something they loved, and a sad sense of hope lingers.

Barbara had an ambivalent relationship to monsters, after all. They were the creatures that made her famous, but she was always placed on the victim side. Friends and enemies, finding her end at the hand of monsters gives closure to her story. Moreover, monsters is a fit metaphor for a murderer too. Also, against all the other rather romantic accounts of achievement and liberation, this rather farfetched way of finding a happy ending for Barbara makes even more manifest how her death was the most unfair of them all.

Practicing openness does not mean that previous reticence against this story is completely overcome. Barbara's ending still feels unfair and unsatisfying. However, not fighting against it allows us to better appreciate how it fits with the themes in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Felski's method, which explores the roots of attachment and, as I have shown, also detachment, indeed leads us to better appreciation of what we might at first want to reject, it attunes us to works or episodes that might at first drive us away.