

Interrogating “Her Story” Creator Sam Barlow and Actress Viva Seifert (Interview)

July 10, 2015

[Adventure](#) / [Her Story](#) / [Interview](#) / [iPad Game](#) / [iPhone game](#) / [Murder Mystery](#) / [mystery](#) / [Puzzle](#)
[11 Comments](#)

Her Story
By: Sam Barlow



*As anyone who's been following me here or on [Twitter](#) for the last few weeks might have noticed, [I've been a bit obsessed with the game "Her Story."](#) I reached out to the creator, Sam Barlow, to conduct an interview, to which he generously agreed. We've been doing it one question at a time over email and I thought it might be interesting to let my audience see it as it's happening. I would also welcome readers to offer up their own questions in the comments sections. So if you have some burning questions about the game, leave them here and I'll see if I can get answers for some of them. (The interview's now over, so questions are closed.) *Note: There are some spoilers, but I put a spoiler warning before they start.*

Update: Actress Viva Seifert graciously agreed to join the interrogation. I'm adding her questions below Sam's, [on the second page](#). Hopefully it won't get too confusing!

AppUnwrapper: First of all, congratulations on creating such a unique experience with *Her Story*. I honestly can't remember a game having this effect on me before. I've had books, movies and TV shows that messed with my head and stuck with me, but with most games I play, I have a good time, maybe write about them, and then move on. It seems a lot of people are having this same reaction and are dissecting every little detail in the game, trying to find some hidden secret that may have eluded us. What's your reaction to this? Did you anticipate it at all or was it more of a surprise? And have you been paying any attention to all the theories?

Sam Barlow: I guess I was trying to create something that would linger in people's heads. It was important to me — and I think important particularly in games, where you are requiring the audience's direct participation — to leave some of the details to the player's imagination. The imagination does the majority of the heavy lifting when you're enjoying a story and I think it's cool to give some ownership of that story to the player, let it live on in their heads. That's certainly how a lot of my favorite stories work.

I perhaps wasn't expecting the extent of the community response — the amount of discussion and debate around the game. Perhaps I should when people started making Serial comparisons! I think I underestimated the way players start to think when they know something is in the 'mystery' genre, and also how much the addition of the 'database program' that allowed you to see your progress would fuel the need to tick all the boxes. That said, I spent the large majority of the development time working on the story and the layers that it contains, so it's super, super gratifying to see people react in this way and seeing the players take the game as seriously as I did when I made it!

I briefly took a look at a few theory threads and quickly retreated — part of me felt that by even looking at those threads, my gaze could accidentally give away which side I favoured — and I didn't want to do that!

AU: Ah ok. So one of my questions was whether there's an official explanation in your head, or if it's open-ended even for you. It sounds like there is one. If so, do you think you'll ever share it with the world? Maybe as behind-the-scenes extras?

SB: I guess there's an official answer inasmuch as there's a version in my head that drove my writing and in some cases Viva's performance. But I'm very wary of saying that that is the 'official version', because so much of the game is designed around putting things in the player's hands, and in their mind. This is doubly true because I always find that whatever I thought I was doing, often my subconscious has another entirely different idea — sometimes this is exposed when a performer gets hold of the script and brings to light an interpretation that is much richer and more honest than what was consciously in my head.

I admire artists who are happy to put the work out there and let it speak for itself — and particularly those who are reluctant to take away from its magic. Although I wouldn't compare myself to him, someone like David Lynch is a good example — he resists doing extensive DVD extras or commentary tracks because everything he has to say is there on the screen — in the most artful way that he can say it. To talk about the work, to try and explain it is a much less effective and cruder means of communication than the movie itself.

Of course there is always the chance that someone will get me drunk and then upload that onto youtube as the 'definitive answer'. I'm on my guard against strangers offering drinks...

AU: Haha. It's gotten that crazy? Do you fear people might kidnap you to get to the truth? Just kidding!

Since you mentioned Viva Seifert, I wanted to ask how she got the part. She did an excellent job and seems made for it (or vice versa). Did you have her in mind while writing the script? And it sounds like you gave her some freedom with the performance. Can you talk more about that?

SB: I'd worked with Viva before. After Silent Hill Shattered Memories the team and me moved onto another project — a big budget action adventure title. For the last year of that project we did a lot of motion capture, and for that we cast Viva as one of the major roles. She was so good that every time we did a session we would come out of it and write more of her character; every time her character got more and more important in the story. So when that project was cancelled one of the big tragedies for me was that no-one would see Viva's work in that game! When I started thinking about Her Story, once I had a rough idea of what the game was and what the story was, I reached out to Viva to see if she would like to work together again. Her saying yes was an important moment for the project! So, yes, from the early stages Viva was central in my mind as I was writing.

One of Viva's strengths is that she can extract a lot of the richness in a script and very intuitively package that up and perform it without a lot of back and forth. She really just gets into the character and goes with the moment. But out of that connection to the character comes a lot of precision in terms of her voice, her hands, face, how she works with that. So when we came to shoot I had spent a lot of time on the script, ensuring that all of the information was in it, in some cases somewhat buried. And so we just shot it very naturally, just running through each interview as if it were happening, letting Viva run with the moment. We'd pick up on some mannerisms, etc. or try a few different angles, but it was very much trusting Viva to follow the through line of the interviews and her connection to the character.

AU: Well, that was definitely a great choice. It must be hard to carry a script as the sole actress and she managed to do it so well with hardly any props. Her performance sucked me in right away. I hesitate to compare anything to Tatiana Maslany's performance on "Orphan Black," but that's what came to mind while playing the game. These kinds of characters/roles depend so heavily on the actress' abilities. Was there a lot of pressure to get it right? And did it take long to get all the footage the way you wanted it? Did anything get left on the cutting room floor?

SB: There was a lot of pressure on the shoot but luckily we'd both jumped into it somewhat naively and hadn't really thought through just how intense it would be. By the time we were stuck in the room and the camera was rolling, it was too late... We shot the interview days in order and had all the detective's dialogue so Viva was reacting to their questions, there was a flow to things. And the intensity of the situation helped everyone get in the zone. A few days

in, we felt like we'd been in real police interrogations for days... we were ready to give up and confess everything! The whole shoot took a week and we were filming almost non-stop. In terms of the cutting room floor... other than the many alternate takes there were some colorful outbursts from Viva that will forever remain under lock and key.

(Spoilers ahead!)

AU: Ha! You're not worried that information may lead to Viva's kidnapping now?

Since you mentioned the detective interviews, I was hoping you might be willing to shine some light on the gaps between clips. We've noticed that most videos have 3-4 seconds, with the exception of a few odd ones that take longer. Even putting on the lie detector only took three seconds. Do the detective questions actually work out that way or is something else going on here?

SM: There's a chance I didn't anticipate people taking such a detailed look at the clip timestamps... but if you have an explanation that makes me look cleverer, I'm happy to go with it 😊

More spoilers ahead!

AU: Aww. I don't, but I think everyone was hoping there was one. Maybe they'll still find one! 😊

While I'm picking at details, I was wondering if you intended people to briefly consider that Simon was a twin. I loved that little red herring — or at least what seemed like one. It only works because of the way we find parts of the story, but my brain went there long enough to get me to explore that possibility. Was that intentional and were there other red herrings that you threw in there, knowing it would work well with the format?

SB: This might be a dodge of an answer, but *I* didn't really intend for there to be any red herrings. If there's anything that is obscured or hidden from players then it's something that the characters were doing, or a natural consequence of the game's structure. Of course that combination means there's a lot that can trip players up, but it wasn't something I laid out carefully like an elaborate trap. The mechanic and structure was me being the 'game designer, puppet master', but the actual writing itself was much more character-driven.

I think there was a point early on in the story development where there were more elaborate complexities to the other families who orbit the story, but most of those were trimmed out in the interests of keeping the focus more localized.

AU: Just a few minutes ago, I was discussing an ambiguous ending to a game with another developer (Graham Ranson of Glitch Games) and he quoted Joss Whedon: "All worthy work is open to interpretations the author did not intend. Art isn't your pet — it's your kid. It grows up and talks back to you." Is that what's happened with "Her Story?"

And while we're discussing trimming and editing —

How did you decide on what would be in those first four clips, other than the word "Murder?" Obviously, you needed to give just the right information to hook the player but not give away too much. Was it hard to figure that out? And when did you even decide to start with "Murder?"

SM: I'd hope so. Working with larger teams, and actors in particular, you realize just how powerful this is — because they can take something you thought of one way and show you an entirely different angle on it. Sometimes this was probably the angle you were shooting for in your subconscious, but they were able to draw it out and show it to you. The creator's intention is something that matters in the process but once the game is finished, it's the discarded mould or the paint pot that needs cleaning up.

Starting with murder wasn't something I planned necessarily, but when I was approaching the end of the development I decided I would need a word to kick things off and give the player something to grab onto. There was something appealing about the fact that murder pulled in the last clip chronologically (highlighting that the game would be non-linear) and also pulled in a few other threads & outfits. And clearly it's very evocative and dramatic. I think I'd toyed with other options — but none of them had this combination of being a great word and having a nice

selection of clips. So, yeah, I basically looked at the words that could be used and picked one that had a — serendipitously! — nice selection of clips associated with it. It works so nicely, it's hard to believe it wasn't designed that way, but that's the truth!

****More spoilers!****

AU: This seems like a good time to ask about the admin command that was found, called "Admin_Share." It seems to email the player's search history to an address about a word cloud. Can you give any details about your plans for that? How much detail does it give you and how do you intend to use it?

One of the things I would love to know is what other people chose as their first search words. I think "tattoo" was one of my very first, because it led me to believe her name was "Eve" and I was confused that the first "Eve" clip had her calling her friend by that name instead of herself. But I assume most people search "Simon" first, which leads to "Smith" and then "Hannah." I read [your blog about wanting people to break the game](#), and that might be what I was doing? Although, based on your last answer, maybe I'm seeing too much intelligent design where there isn't any? 😊

SB: Admin_Share? Yes, that's a feature that I have in there and will announce when my time has freed up and I have the chance to sit down and set up my side of it. It's a cute way to pool together everyone's different searches — and might be useful to browse for people stuck trying to get the last few clips! I was freaked out when people started activating it without my announcing it. I now have over 1,000 credit card numbers! (joke).

People's first few searches are actually pretty broad — lots of different people, lots of different searches! Some people like to strike out and go wild, some pick up on the names, others go straight for 'detective' type words. It's fascinating to see the variations!

In terms of 'breaking the game', I think that's about me giving up control over what the player does and sees, and knowing that even if they discover the clips in a totally different order (one that's broken if compared with my original ideas) it should provide them with a valid experience.

AU: I'm looking forward to that. It should be interesting to see what others searched for (even the pranksters).

On that same note — I noticed some naysayers complain about the plot's predictability, that they figured it out right away. That's actually what hooked me and it felt intentional. So what's your reaction to that?

SB: Yeah, for me the interest isn't necessarily in figuring out 'what happened' on a high level, but digging down and trying to solve the 'why-dunnit' questions, feel like you understand the characters and their lives. I think there's enough going on in the story that this should be enjoyable for the majority of players. But it's not going to be for everyone!

****Spoiler alert!****

AU: About the song, which I'll call *The Dreadful Wind and Rain*. I fell instantly in love with it, including Viva's performance. Since she called it a traditional ballad, I Googled it. What I found was an old story called *The Twa Sisters* and some newer songs inspired by it. *Her Story's* version had some of the same lyrics, but with alterations, obviously to draw stronger parallels to the story. So, my question is, which came first? Was the song at all an inspiration for the story or did you find that song and decide to use it once you were already deep into the writing?

SB: I went looking for a song that would work well in the game. I was attracted to the idea of using a murder ballad because it would set off some of the more mythical elements and tie the game back into those kind of primal stories. I've used popular songs in games before (Shattered Memories included a couple of cover versions of Always on My Mind) and I'm always drawn to how powerful a song can be when it's inserted into the world of the story. I loved the 'New York, New York' sequence from Shame, for example. (I'd love to one day make a game as minimalist, but powerful as Shame!)

AU: I haven't seen "Shame," but now I plan to! On the topic of music, can you talk a bit about the soundtrack? It's so understated and can even be repetitive, and yet there's something about it that gives me chills. Even the music in the credits — it feels deliberately out of place and so eerie, but I can't quite put my finger on why.

SB: Shame is awesome btw. Very moving, very well done.

Yeah, I was looking for something that worked with a combination of sounding slightly out-of-time, having an emotional through line and slotting into the atmosphere of the archive room and desktop PC. I discovered the work of Chris Zabriskie and thought his stuff was perfect. It has some elements which invoke nostalgia, but also has a modern edge; it has an emotional appeal but also has an amount of abstraction. Top stuff. The music was one of those things that was there to cut through the experience and create a little bit of separation between the 'world of the game' and the world of the player — important in establishing that there's a difference.

AU: Cool, so it wasn't just my imagination. I was surprised to see some folks complaining that the music was boring, when I found it hit just the right note to make me uncomfortable. Really effective.

You mention in your blog that games can be interesting while being "about authentic and true life" ([the "Kitchen Sink"](#)), as opposed to the supernatural. But you must admit that Her Story's character, whichever explanation the player decides to believe, is far from your everyday Average Jane. The game even draws comparisons to fairy tales. Do you think the structure of "Her Story" could have worked just as well without that plot element? I mean, don't get me wrong — you definitely created a compelling story here, with an interesting character who's fascinating to listen to. But do you think you could have achieved the same result with a more ordinary character?

SB: I guess in my defence, the content of Her Story is much more 'Kitchen Sink' than most videogames! Even a supernatural tale can be grounded in some form of truth. What frustrates me about much of the scenarios in video games is that so much emphasis is placed on characters whose connection to reality, or whose fundamental truth is absent. That most characters whose key struggle isn't with saving the world or fighting hordes of aliens can be dismissed as 'kitchen sink'.

Would Her Story have worked if the plot was played entirely 'straight'? I don't know — it would certainly be different. I mean the game is the story I was drawn to and the story I wrote. My inclination is to make things slightly more rarified or throw in a bit more dramatic chiaroscuro than is natural, that's just the stuff I am compelled to write. One of the things I like about the game is how it gives certain material a new look. One of my favorite novels is The Monk, and if you were to do an adaptation of that now, It would work best if you treated all of its material as if it were true and took it seriously.

AU: I was an English major in college and I'm not sure how I missed reading "The Monk," but I'll add that to the list of books/movies/games I need to check out after this interview!

And I like how you put that. While I do love my share of supernatural stories, I prefer the ones that are more grounded in reality. My favorites are those that offer a believable "what if" — speculative fiction, if you will, over straight-out science fiction. So I do think that's one of the aspects of "Her Story" that drew me in — some parts might be unlikely, but they're still believable enough without resorting to time travel or aliens to explain it all away. Were you ever tempted to take it a bit further with the supernatural elements? (Now I'm starting to imagine a hidden three-second clip in which an alien bursts out of her chest.)

SB: Hmm, not in this case — I think after work on the dark fantasy of Legacy of Kain a few years back I was definitely ready to focus on something that didn't have any fantastical or supernatural elements. That said, the format would work perfectly if you threw in some Gene Wolfe tropes — shape shifters, werewolves, etc. A version of Her Story where there's a clip that's essentially the ending of The Howling would be fantastic.

AU: I can totally see Her Story alternate endings being a thing... maybe?

I just realized that Legacy of Kain is the game you and Viva were working on that got cancelled. How did that influence your future work? Was that the only scrapped project you ever worked on?

SB: I can't say too much about that project specifically. Its biggest influence was probably that we put a lot of effort into creating interesting characters and have them speak in as succinct a way as possible, pushing a lot of their stuff into subtext. This was before *Game of Thrones* had hit big and so it wasn't necessarily the obvious direction to take a fantasy action adventure. There's a small chance that some of its themes carried over to *Her Story*, on a very different scale.

That game was the most time I've spent on a project before it was cancelled. I also worked on a game called *Elveon*, which was my first chance to create a game story from scratch — and had a fun time creating a noir world war two espionage story with Elves. That one was reasonably far in before the project was cancelled. And lots of other smaller projects or pitches that had an amount of work put into them but never moved into full development. All of it is useful experience — *Elveon* was a chance to learn a lot of technical know how that went directly into *Shattered Memories*.

AU: I'm down to my last couple of questions, but before I get to them, a few of my readers had some questions. They wanted to know if we would ever get to see the detective's side of the interrogations. Do you think you might be willing to release that out into the wild at some point? And is there any plan to make a proper audio recording of "The Dreadful Wind and Rain?"

SB: A few people have asked about the detective's side of things. I dunno... some of their questions are very specific and could ruin everyone's fun. Maybe further down the line and as a kind of curio thing. I half considered it as part of the game after I played Simogo's *The Sailor's Dream*. The 'print' option in that game was so cool... I thought maybe you could receive bits of the detectives' transcript via a kind of faux fax print out. But for the reasons already given I held off.

No plans for a proper release of the song! But it would be cute — if the game sells over a million copies, I promise to bend Viva's arm and have a proper studio recording of the track — and give 25% of the proceeds to a charity that campaigns against murdering people for the purposes of making musical instruments.

AU: That actually sounds like a really cool idea, but I can see how it would have changed the entire experience. I hope you do find some way to use them...maybe once enough time has passed that it won't ruin the fun for too many people?

How many copies have you sold so far, if you don't mind my asking? I want to see if that's more likely to make it happen than starting a petition. 😊

And it so happens, I'm in middle of founding a charity called "No More Fiddles Out of Breastbones!"

While we're on the topic, I wanted to thank you for releasing the game on iOS at the same time as PC. iOS is often overlooked when developers design a game for PC, and if I had to play *Her Story* at a desk, it would have felt too much like work. But on my iPad, it was like curling up on my couch with a good book. What I want to know is what made you decide to do it this way and if you think it was worth it. Did it sell on iOS as well as you expected? Would you release your next game the same way? And to take it a bit further, would you maybe consider porting *Aisle* to iOS?

SB: I'm not announcing sales just yet but it's a ways off a million so far — but far more than I was hoping for!

I wanted to launch on both desktop and mobile because frankly I didn't know where the audience might be. So I wanted to cover the main channels that made sense. Both desktop and mobile sold better than I expected, so in that sense it worked well! The split is about 60/40 desktop/mobile, which is a pretty decent split, right? If I'd just gone for just one I'd have lost a lot of the potential audience. I think desktop and mobile are the two most accessible platforms — almost everyone who is likely to want to play *Her Story* has a computer or a phone or a tablet in their house even if they don't have a console.

If the next idea can work on desktop and mobile then I'll definite put it out there — and my experience with *Her Story* definitely makes me want to work with this same audience.

Aisle on iOS? Hmm, I've seen some text games ported over, but I'm not sure if it would work perfectly. Not necessarily the amount of typing, but there's still a little bit of understanding how that classic text parser works, how to phrases things, etc. Plus, you can probably (I haven't checked!) play it in a browser on your iPad already?

AU: Ahh so I might have to start that petition after all? Viva said she might record the song if there were enough signatures (she wouldn't specify a number).

I'm glad mobile was worth it. I know the iPhone version is a bit tight, but the pre-iPad me would have appreciated that you went through the trouble of getting it onto the small screen at all. Did you consider leaving iPhone out at any point?

SB: It was in the back of my mind — if it didn't work, I wasn't going to force it. Once I tried the version with a slightly different resolution (a retro 640x480 rather than a retro 800x600) it clicked. I tried it on a few people and they liked it and I was impressed by the 'dinky'ness of having the game running on a phone.

AU: I just tried to access "Aisle" on my iPad but got an error. 😞 Still, I played around with it a bit on my PC (there's not much that can get me in front of my PC for long these days) and it feels a lot like "Her Story," but potentially endless. I typed in "eat pasta" and am now hooked. If I did have it on my iPad or iPhone, I could totally see pulling it out every once in a while just to try a new phrase. You gonna make me buy a Surface for it? 😊

SB: Haha. The Surface probably has a killer app, but Aisle isn't it 😊

AU: Do you have anything in mind for your next project? Would you ever consider doing another game in this format or is it a one-off? I'm probably not the first to ask, but do you think anything will happen with that "ambitious, kick ass follow up" you tweeted about?

SB: I have some ideas... that might work out, and might not. I'm also doing a few other projects that I've been talking to people about for a while. That should give me some time to make sure the next Big Idea is one I can fall in love with like I did Her Story. Now that I've proven to myself that there's an audience for something like this, I definitely want to build on that — so it will be *something* that if you liked Her Story, you should like the next project.

AU: Glad to hear! I know I'm not the only one who's been desperately looking for other games that offer a similar experience. (Limiting myself to iOS is not helping — may have to get a comfortable PC for "Gone Home" and the like.)

Since we started this interview almost three weeks ago(!), I should probably end here, before I'm tempted to ask more nit-picky questions. But I do want to thank you for your time and, of course, creating a game that hijacked my brain for almost a month now. I hope this cult-like following you created with "Her Story" isn't too frightening!

SB: Yes, you need a comfortable PC. My PC is my Kentucky Route Zero machine, with brief interludes of Fjords.

I think my overwhelming emotion isn't fear, it's tiredness (is that an emotion?) — I've probably never worked as hard as the last few weeks, handling tech support requests, press inquiries, interviews and all sorts of other stuff that has come my way since the game launched! It's a good thing, but, yeah, tiring!

***Viva Seifert's interview starts on the next page. Click on the little numbers below to see it or [just click here](#). If you have any questions, ask in the comments section and I'll try to work them in!**

Note: Sometimes a promo code is provided for a game, but it does not affect the review in any way. At AppUnwrapper, we strive to provide reviews of the utmost quality.

[Check out my recommended list for other games you might like.](#)

If you like what you see on AppUnwrapper.com, please consider supporting the site through [Patreon](#). Every little bit helps and is greatly appreciated. [You can read more about it here](#). And as always, if you like what you see, please help others find it by sharing it.

[I also offer affordable testing and consulting for iOS developers.](#)

COPYRIGHT NOTICE © AppUnwrapper 2011-2020. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this blog's author is strictly prohibited. Links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to AppUnwrapper with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.