



Coming Home:
The Relationship between Narrative and Spatiality in
Gone Home

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Abstract

Many approaches to video games tend to ignore the uniqueness stemming from their special mode of spatiality; although they do explore interactivity, they do not necessarily connect this to spatial practices that emerge from the player's conscious navigation through game space, thus enabling many different narrative possibilities. Especially independent developers learn to recognise this potential and create games like *Journey*, *Dear Esther* or *Gone Home* to investigate the narrative and emotional possibilities that emerge as a result of said spatiality. This paper discusses *Gone Home* within a theoretical framework of video games focusing on spatiality and narrative, and explores the connection between space and narrative that is present in the game by pointing out how the narrative in *Gone Home* is intricately linked to spatial practices.

Keywords: *Gone Home*, video games, narrative, space, place, home, independent games

Introduction

Video games are undoubtedly a spatial medium. Although borrowing from conventions of other media like film, especially in more cinematic games, the digital representation of space is unique due to their interactive nature, giving the gamer the opportunity to exert a great deal of agency over the navigation through and perception of space in both rule-based and narrative contexts. Game developers recognise such unique opportunities and start to explore the issue more in-depth in recent independent games.¹ For instance in *Journey*² the gamer plays a robed figure in a desert travelling towards a mountain, and *Dear Esther*³ is a first-person epistolary narrative where the gamer explores a desolate island while randomly scripted voice-over fragments provide some context in letter form. Games like these depart heavily from the so-called AAA games⁴ which focus on generic conventions like shooter elements and assign lower importance to the personal explorative parts of gameplay. They not only redefine the nature of video games in reiterating that games do not need technological superiority to be an intriguing experience,⁵ but also fuel the debate about whether video games can be recognised as an art form.⁶ Another video game that has incited lively debates is the critically acclaimed, explorative *Gone Home*.⁷ Here, the developers worked on the premise “that if you took those moments of discovery from the games that inspire [them], and give the players the ability to really deeply interrogate the environment, that could itself be the core of the experience.”⁸

This study first establishes a theoretical framework of spatial representation and narrative in video games and further exemplifies this relationship on the basis of *Gone Home*.

¹ Independent games are developed by small teams and are usually conceived as non-commercial in their conception, although some independent games can become incredibly successful as well.

² 2012, developed by Thatgamecompany.

³ 2012, developed by The Chinese Room.

⁴ The industry term for high-budget, high-quality video games.

⁵ In *Journey*, for instance, the “emotion came from its air of mystery, from the simple pleasure of its streamlined central mechanics, and from its groundbreaking multiplayer component” (Edge, 2013).

⁶ These games tend to be referred to as ‘art games’ in the gaming community, suggesting that if the popular notion of the inferiority of video games is cast aside, video games have the potential to be much more than simply a means of entertainment in popular culture. For more views on this discussion, consider Gee, 2006; Jenkins, 2007, pp. 19-40; and Adams, 2014.

⁷ 2013, developed by Fullbright Company.

⁸ Alexander, 2013.

Chapter I: What's in a Game? Video Games as a Narrative and Spatial Medium

Theoretical Stances Towards Video Games

The medium of the video game is a relatively young one compared to other current media, yet its developments have been enormous. Born out of the designs and rules of conventional non-electronic games, one of its most direct predecessors is often seen in the pen-and-paper role-playing system *Dungeon & Dragons*, introduced in 1974 with many similar role-playing systems soon following in its wake.⁹ Such games are entirely dependent on player-player and player-narrator interaction: each player plays an individual character, often developing extensive background stories for them, whose characteristics and abilities are dependent on race (for instance hobbit, dwarf and elf in the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*) and class (for instance wizard, warrior, or cleric). The dungeon master, i.e. narrator narrates the imaginary scenes, and the players describe their characters' actions and reactions.¹⁰ These types of tabletop games have heavily influenced "two types of video games: the text adventures initiated by *Adventure and Zork*, and the multiplayer **MUDs** (multi-user dungeon games) and their graphical predecessors."¹¹ The development of *Spacewar!* in 1962 and the resulting arcade game *Computer Space* in 1971 are often cited as a decisive historical moment in the evolution of video games, and they gradually moved from the public space of the game arcade to the private domestic sphere and the realm of the internet.^{12,13}

Historically, game studies have been divided by two opposing positions of approaching games: ludology on the one hand and narratology on the other. Ludologists believe that video games should be considered through the medium's intrinsic properties, focusing on rules structuring the games. They therefore "[want] to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play"¹⁴ and do not consider it useful to analyse video games in regard to their narrative properties. Among the most influential ludologists are scholars like Juul, Eskelinen, Frasca and Järvinen.

Narratologists situate video games firmly within the context of other narrative media and attempt to approach them with already established theoretical frameworks, strongly focusing on literary theory. Exploring the medium's narrative possibilities, they have been heavily criticised by ludologists for disregarding the inherent rule-based properties. Among the most outspoken narratologists are Murray and Ryan. Several scholars, among them

⁹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 47.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 48, original emphasis.

¹² Wolf, 2001, p. 23.

¹³ Stockburger, 2006, p. 88.

¹⁴ Jenkins, 2004, p. 118.

Henry Jenkins and Jesper Juul, have attempted to occupy a middle stance incorporating both the mechanics and the resulting narrative possibilities. This paper attempts to take a similar middle stance with a tendency towards narratology, recognising the medium-specific structural qualities and viewing them in terms of narrative possibility.

Juul distinguishes between two types of video games: games of emergence and games of progression. Games of emergence are based on "a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations," whereas in games of progression, a pre-determined series of actions needs to be fulfilled for completion, giving much control to the game designer.¹⁵ In classical adventure games, these actions were limited, which made a narratological literary approach appropriate while "ludologists dismissed them as too linear (i.e. not interactive enough to count as games)."¹⁶ Nowadays video games have evolved far from this rather linear quality. Veugen cites games like *Heavy Rain*¹⁷ (2010) as prime examples, where "the outcome of the game literally depends on a vast number of choices the gamer can make along the way, making it [...] highly likely that replaying the game will lead to a different ending."¹⁸ The popularity of open-world games is significant here, where the gamer can take different story paths through numerous side-quests and world exploration, whereas the main narrative can be linear (as in the *Assassin's Creed*¹⁹ series) or have a more open narrative structure (as in *Red Dead Redemption*²⁰).

Two interrelated characteristics that significantly set apart video games from other media such as film and literature are interactivity and agency: the gamer has a certain amount of control over their actions in the video game. Veugen points out that "[t]his is what makes storytelling in games different from other media. Gamers want to have the idea that their actions are meaningful and influence what happens next, even though the overall outcome of the game stays the same."²¹ Gamers are thus awarded a sense of authorship.

An exhaustive discussion of narrative in video games goes beyond the scope of this paper.²² While it is important to consider the medium within the general context of play/game and theoretical stances on video games, it is most useful at this point to consider some pragmatic video game definitions. For instance, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al. refer to the features Chris Crawford considers common to all video games. These are (subjective)

¹⁵ Juul, 2005, p. 5.

¹⁶ Veugen, 2011, p. 224.

¹⁷ 2010, developed by Quantic Dream.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ 2013-present, main games developed by Ubisoft Montreal.

²⁰ 2010, developed by Rockstar Games.

²¹ Veugen, 2011, p. 219.

²² For more extensive discussions, see Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, and Veugen, 2011.

representation; interaction, which presupposes that the gamer “get[s] meaningful responses to his actions, so that he feels engaged with the game;” conflict (electronic or human); and the safety of said conflicts “not carry[ing] the same consequences as those same conflicts in the real world.”²³ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al. find especially the last point debatable, as it refers to Huizinga’s concept of the ‘magic circle’ essentially creating a space separate from the real world in which the game is to be enjoyed.²⁴ This clear distinction between reality and game world becomes especially problematic when considering hybrid game forms like the alternate reality game or mobile games that can be specifically designed to interact with the real world. Another pragmatic definition is the MDA (*Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics*) model developed by Hunicke, Le Blanc and Zubeck. Here, a game essentially consists of its mechanics (code and rules); dynamics (the actual experience based on mechanics); and aesthetics, which denote the “favourable emotional responses invoked in the player as he or she interacts with the game.”²⁵ They cite a wide range of emotional responses such as sensation, fantasy, narrative, discovery or submission.

An important aspect of conventional narratives are ‘cut-scenes,’ which are “cinematic sequences used to relay information to the player” introducing a “central narrative tension” as well as characters, setting and mood. They “[s]hape the narrative in a certain direction.”²⁶ Their use within the narrative is debatable and not approved by everyone, as they might simply compensate for missing in-game narrative and interrupt the gameplay. In-game characters are also used for narrative purposes. Apart from the player character, non-player characters may populate the game world, which can be stage characters, functional characters, and cast characters, with increasing narrative importance.²⁷ Veugen points out that it is reasonable to further distinguish between the avatar, “i.e. the token that moves through the game world [...] and the character in the story that the gamer comes to identify with (the protagonist).”²⁸

The experience of a video game is determined by several aesthetic factors such as rules, which “determine what you (and other characters in the game) can and cannot do,” geography and representation, where “a video game’s geography ‘physically’ blocks certain actions [...] while allowing others,” and number of players.²⁹ The next section focuses on the second aesthetic of spatial representation in video games.

²³ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 24.

²⁵ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, pp. 38-39.

²⁶ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, pp. 176-177.

²⁷ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 178-179.

²⁸ Veugen, 2011, p. 229.

²⁹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 97.

Spatial Representation in Video Games

Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al. compare the fictional world with a theatre stage in the sense that many spatial details are non-interactive and “[o]nly objects directly related to gameplay will be ‘usable,’ although certain contemporary games with advanced physics offer the possibility of interacting with objects unrelated to the story.”³⁰ Video games can differ in perspective (first- or third-person), dimension (two, 2.5- and three-dimensional) and space type. The latter can be limited to only one screen (like in early games) or consist of “unconnected levels, zone-based multi-screen spaces, and seamless multi-screen spaces.”³¹ Whether or not a game scrolls (horizontally or vertically) impacts the player’s freedom to explore. Graphical style also needs to be considered and can be photorealistic, caricaturistic or abstract.³² Finally, the issue of sounds is closely related to space as well.³³

Stockburger provides an in-depth exploration of game space within the framework of Lefebvre’s concepts of perceived, conceived and lived spaces. He claims that these are mediated in video games as well, and “to fully comprehend *game space*, the spatial practice of creating and playing computer games has to be considered equally important as the formal aspects of spatial representation.”³⁴ Lefebvre, emphasising space as social construct, considers the body a sufficient starting point for spatial representation. ‘Perceived space’ refers to space that is experienced physically, whereas ‘conceived space’ is approached through scientific representations of the body, which are “prone to be mixed up with ideological contents and constantly evolve.”³⁵ Lastly, ‘lived’ space mediates between the two, depending on “social and cultural conventions and [...] accompanied by an ‘illusory’ immediacy that is prefigured by symbolisms evolving from religious traditions and mythologies.”³⁶ Therefore, we are spatially connected with three fields of firstly physical, secondly mental, and thirdly social nature.^{37,38}

³⁰ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 175.

³¹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al., 2001, p. 116. For a more detailed exploration of all the different aspects, consider Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2001, Chapter 5.

³² Many contemporary games attempt to achieve as much photorealism as possible, but some currently influential games such as Telltale Games’s episodic *The Walking Dead* (2012 - present) and *The Wolf Among Us* (2013 – present) show that a caricaturistic style can also achieve high emotional involvement.

³³ Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2001, p. 125.

³⁴ Stockburger, 2006, p. 75, original emphasis.

³⁵ Stockburger, 2006, p. 74.

³⁶ Stockburger, 2006, p. 74.

³⁷ Stockburger, 2006, p. 67.

³⁸ This triad is also re-considered by Edward Soja, who terms the different spaces Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. Thirdspace differs most from Lefebvre’s original model because it

Stockburger considers Lefebvre's triad a valid approach to spatial representations in video games because he conceives of them as being similar to real-life space: they are *practiced*, and therefore "there is a dimension of computer games that is experienced beyond the realm of the logos."³⁹ He introduces five spatial modalities in video games that he connects with Lefebvre's concepts: *user space* (perceived), *narrative* and *rule space* (conceived), and *kinaesthetic space* (lived), established through *audiovisual representational space*.⁴⁰ These modalities constantly communicate with and influence one another.

User space describes the physical location of the gamer, i.e. the technical aspects of gaming and the surrounding space (social and physical).⁴¹ Stockburger gives four broad categories of user space related to the evolution of video games throughout time. The game arcade was a *public space* with a strong social component through interaction with other potential gamers. Due to the public location and short gaming sessions, they were unable to convey complex narrative spaces, but the consoles were designed to heavily impact the kinaesthetic space. The *domestic space* became prominent in 1967, enabling complex narrative spaces due to longer gaming sessions and the possibility to save the status of a game. It may still remain a social space through multiplayer options and the tendency for gamers to play single-player games together by taking turns. *Mobile and location-based games* depend on positioning systems; here, gamespace is completely determined by user space. According to Stockburger, these games encourage something similar to the situationist *dérive*.⁴² Lastly, *internet and networked games* negotiate several kinds of game spaces simultaneously. Online games fragment user space but share a representational game space. In networked games, a significant number of players meets in the same physical environment to play against one another. User and representational spaces are shared, but there is a tendency towards segmenting the user space through isolation by using headphones and so forth.⁴³

Rule space lies at the core of video games, since rules most directly impact how game space is being navigated by the gamer, not only determining or shaping "player action explicitly but also [...] defin[ing] how objects will act or react as part of the program architecture."⁴⁴ Stockburger divides *narrative space* into spatial narratives and frame

rather appears as a "post-modern container of difference, otherness and novel approaches;" Firstspace corresponds to reality and Secondspace to the imaginary (Stockburger, 2006, p. 81).

³⁹ Stockburger, 2006, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Stockburger, 2006, p. 82.

⁴¹ Stockburger, 2006, p. 87-88.

⁴² Stockburger, 2006, p. 102.

⁴³ Stockburger, 2006, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Stockburger, 2006, p. 120.

narratives. The frame narrative provides thematic context before the game is played, whereas spatial narratives only emerge through gameplay.⁴⁵ He sees the frame narrative “as an instance that generates a kind of place, because it introduces an order that will then be transformed into the *game space* by the spatial operations of the player.”⁴⁶ The spatial narrative is very much related to tour and map structures, based on De Certeau’s insistence that “[e]very story is a travel story.”⁴⁷ Especially text-based adventure games rely heavily on the mental construction of the game space map to contextualise given information and relate it to their spatial practice. In other games too, “[n]arrative space [...] often mobilises themes based on discovery and exploration that lead to a gameplay.”⁴⁸ Jenkins, whom Stockburger refers to in this discussion, points out that even in the role-playing games mentioned above, “the Dungeon Master’s activities start with designing the space – the dungeon – where the player’s quest will take place,” thus pointing out the intrinsic link between narrative and spatiality.⁴⁹ Jenkins writes about environmental storytelling, where “spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations;” evocative spaces “draw[ing] upon our previously existing narrative competencies;” enacting stories with micro- and macro narratives; embedded narratives where “narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues;” and emergent narratives that are not pre-programmed and instead shaped through gameplay.⁵⁰

Stockburger introduces the *audiovisual representational space* through his game camera model, which he sees as “an inverted camera obscura [...where] the world, which is entirely generated by the game device itself, is presented to the viewer who can alter it by using an interface device.”⁵¹ This modality is heavily determined by ‘Point of Perception’ (PoP, previously referred to as perspective)⁵² which includes visual and aural spatial perception. This can be first-person, third-person, or synoptic. Although first-person PoP is more intuitive and seems ideal for immersion, it provides less spatial information than the other modes and takes the gamer out of the intra-diegetic context as described by Laurie Taylor.⁵³ Third-person PoP provides more information, but complicates certain actions. Therefore, the PoP can be shifted in many games, either manually or automatically when a

⁴⁵ Stockburger, 2006, p. 110-111.

⁴⁶ Stockburger, 2006, p. 112, original emphasis.

⁴⁷ qtd. in Stockburger, 2006, p. 110.

⁴⁸ Stockburger, 2006, p. 116.

⁴⁹ Jenkins, 2004, p. 121.

⁵⁰ Jenkins, 2004, pp. 121-129.

⁵¹ Stockburger, 2006, p. 143.

⁵² The term was coined by Aki Järvinen.

⁵³ Stockburger, 2006, p. 147.

certain action is required. The synoptic PoP, also referred to as 'God view,' provides a top-down view on the game space giving access to all visual information. Here, "the player effectively identifies with the sum of game processes on the map rather than a representational device."⁵⁴ Regardless of PoP, many games provide a map function of varying detail and different importance to the gameplay. Other properties of the game camera are multiplication of screens and movement "either [...] of objects in the *game space* or movement of the *game-camera* itself."⁵⁵

Sound is often neglected in discussions of this and other modalities.⁵⁶ In-game sounds can be *speech sound objects* (mostly narrative), *effect sound objects* which are "cognitively link[ed] to visual objects or significant events," *zone sound objects* denoting certain locations within the game space, *score sound objects* to evoke emotional and immersive responses, and *interface sound objects* which give direct feedback to the gamer.⁵⁷ Sound, then, plays an important part in the spatialisation process and has an *immersive function*. Stockburger especially refers to the *acousmatic function* where the sound source cannot be seen, delineating the invisible ('off-screen') space and extending the represented space beyond the visual and 'behind' the gamer's perspective.⁵⁸ The *spatial signature function* is connected to the physical environment and increases the gamer's feeling of being 'in place' through effects like echoes,⁵⁹ and the *indexical function* provides environmental information that is significant for gameplay and needs to be constantly decoded.⁶⁰ The *motion function* simulates movement through acoustic changes,⁶¹ whereas the *motoric function* simulates movement that is directly influenced by user action, emphasising the final modality of kinaesthetic space.⁶²

Kinaesthetic space directly links the gamer's body to game space. Here, "avatar movement is gradually integrated into the player's body image."⁶³ One of the most appropriate theories here is Csikzentmihalyi's 'flow,' designed to explain the joy that emerges as a result of "activities that entail a loss of time and space perception."⁶⁴ It presupposes a loss of self-consciousness to the rhythm of the game due to the full focus on the activity,

⁵⁴ Stockburger, 2006, p. 153.

⁵⁵ Stockburger, 2006, p. 158, original emphasis.

⁵⁶ For instance the sounds and technical sound possibilities in the user space heavily influence the experience of the game, but this is often not addressed in scholarly discourse.

⁵⁷ Stockburger, 2006, p. 183-189.

⁵⁸ Stockburger, 2006, p. 191-193.

⁵⁹ Stockburger, 2006, p. 198-200.

⁶⁰ Stockburger, 2006, p. 197.

⁶¹ Stockburger, 2006, p. 200.

⁶² Stockburger, 2006, p. 203.

⁶³ Stockburger, 2006, p. 163.

⁶⁴ Stockburger, 2006, p. 170.

“merging action and awareness,”⁶⁵ and thus experiencing a loss of ego. Gaining control over the game’s demands through unambiguous feedback results in a “positive self-concept,” and finally, “[f]low is autotelic.”⁶⁶ This high degree of immersion into an activity is very common to video games, as

To play is to be completely enveloped in the space of the game, a precisely designed interior, a total work of art like that dreamed of by 19th-century artists and architects: an immense immersive space of endless liquid flows in which the player bathes in a kind of prenatal innocence even when devoted to the annihilation of some kind of rival force [...] This is an interior within which the only real risk, as before birth, is to exit.⁶⁷

Based on this, Stockburger claims that a game possesses two different kinds of immersion, on the narrative and the kinaesthetic levels, both of which are in constant interaction with all the other modalities as well.⁶⁸ In the following chapter, *Gone Home* is analysed in correspondence with the theoretical framework discussed in this chapter.

Chapter II: *Gone Home*

Case Study

Gone Home is a 2013 game developed by the Fullbright Company and released for the platforms Microsoft Windows, Mac-OS and Linux. A console version was announced to be released in 2014.⁶⁹ The game’s playtime is set at two hours and has received much critical acclaim, nominated and awarded for its narrative excellence. It has also rekindled the debate on what a game actually is. The following analysis draws on my personal experiences of both regular and commentary mode, and on two test subjects who played the game for the purpose of this study.⁷⁰

The game is set in first-person PoP. The young woman Kaitlin Greenbriar returns to her family’s new but empty house after a long trip to Europe, only to be greeted by a written apology for her sister Samantha’s absence (see Fig. 1). The gamer needs to explore the house to decipher the narrative of her rebellious teenage sister’s exploration of personality and sexuality resulting in a lesbian relationship. The narrative is told in voice-over journals that are triggered by picking up specific objects, propelling the story forward as one gets to know the family on the basis of the things they left behind.

⁶⁵ Stockburger, 2006, p. 171.

⁶⁶ Stockburger, 2006, p. 172.

⁶⁷ Wigley, 2007, p. 485.

⁶⁸ Stockburger, 2006, p. 173.

⁶⁹ Gaynor, 2014.

⁷⁰ The commentary mode is part of the modifiers that *Gone Home* can be played with, which can be chosen at the start of a new game. Other modifiers include all lights on from the beginning, disabling the map, unlocking all doors from the beginning, or disabling the voice diaries.

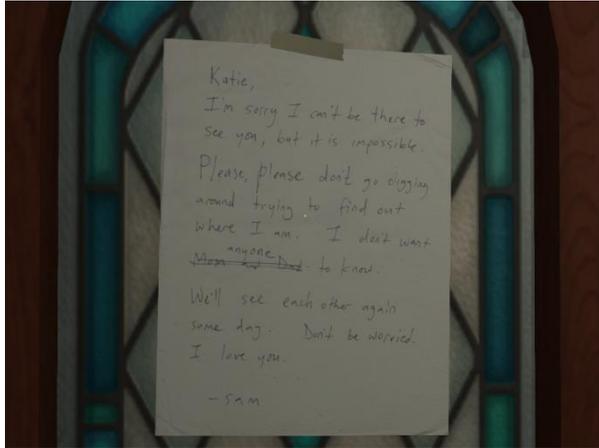


Fig. 1 Samantha's ominous front door note⁷¹



Fig. 2 Investigation of a tissue box.

The main narrative is Samantha's, but there are many sub-narratives hidden in the house that the gamer may pursue. The game mechanics allow for picking up and putting back almost any object, as well as opening drawers and doors. Although not every object actively contributes to a story, it is an important part of environmental storytelling through everyday objects (Fig. 2), enhancing the feeling of being in an actual home. By reading letters, notes, old manuscripts or invoices, the gamer is able to piece together the complex background stories of father, mother and sister.⁷² In total, there are 23 diary entries by Samantha, but only a few are necessary for the game's completion in rule terms: the gamer needs to unlock a diary entry about ghost hunting which includes a map to secret panels in the house to access her locker, which contains the key to the basement. From the basement, the locked wing of the house can be accessed, leading to another secret door. Here, the gamer finds the key to the attic, where the main narrative comes to an end in describing how Samantha and her girlfriend Lonnie ran off together. This retrospectively explains distressed messages from Lonnie on the answering machine and ominous notes from Samantha apologising for what she has stolen.

According to the developers' audio commentaries, the rules technically allow for the game to be finished within 40 seconds; the narrative possibilities however encourage a much longer playtime. The gamer has a lot of narrative agency: it is up to them to unravel the narrative, and some diary entries are easily missed. This can warp the narrative completely.

⁷¹ The note reads: "Katie, I'm sorry I can't be there to see you, but it is impossible. Please, please don't go digging around trying to find out where I am. I don't want ~~Mom and Dad~~ anyone to know. We'll see each other again some day. Don't be worried. I love you. – Sam."

⁷² The father, for instance, is a science fiction writer struggling with his career as heaps of unpublished books and a rejection letter from his editor show. The mother is a forest ranger who is not fulfilled sexually in her marriage, as self-help books like *After the Honeymoon – Rediscovering Your Spouse: Personally, Spiritually, Sexually* and a potential affair with a co-worker suggest. She is mainly explored not through her own notes, but in objects and letters from her friend.

One of my test subjects overlooked the final diary entry before unlocking the end credits. The previous entry leaves Samantha distressed and crying. In the credits, Samantha says good-bye, promising that they will see each other again someday. This encourages the interpretation that she might have committed suicide if the final entry explaining her running away is not found. Because the game invokes previous knowledge of first-person exploration games (mostly of the horror genre) to give gamers a false sense of suspense, this type of ending is not unlikely.⁷³

The spatial representation of *Gone Home* is very personal. The first-person PoP gives little contextual information at once, but this works well considering the game's strong focus on little details. The rule space gives the gamer high explorative freedom, and rule and narrative space are clearly linked, especially in the case of the locked wing: the gamer is required to proceed through at least certain parts of the narrative to access this space as well. The map function (Fig. 3) provides some orientation: explored rooms appear on the map, whereas unexplored rooms remain blank.

Sound is used effectively to generate a subdued atmosphere. Kaitlin's progression is reflected in creaky floorboards and the sounds of her steps, and the game gives audio feedback when picking up or opening objects. The spatial signature function becomes especially effective in the sound of a television that has been left on. This sound is acousmatic, i.e. the player hears it before they see it, and becomes louder when one approaches the room; until then, the gamer might think that there are actual people in the house. Effect sounds further enhance credibility; for instance, a fan, when turned on, makes corresponding sounds and changes the shadows. There are two types of score sound objects: subdued slow background music on the one hand, which becomes louder during a journal entry and enhances the slow, lonely feeling of the game, and on the other hand the gamer can play cassettes (Fig. 4) or records providing an intra-diegetic soundtrack of mostly rock music. Zone sound objects like rain and thunderstorm accompany the game to further enhance the atmosphere.

⁷³ *Gone Home* initially started out as a mod for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (a first-person survival horror video game from 2010); knowledge of this might add another layer of suspense and create a different atmosphere as the gamer might constantly expect the game to turn into a horror video game, encouraged by Samantha's insistence on seeing her late uncle's ghost in the house.



Fig. 3 Map of the ground floor



Fig. 4 A cassette that can be put in the player in the background

The diaries are the only speech sound objects. They create a direct, personal connection to Samantha and the excellent voice-acting by Sarah Grayson conveys strong emotions and makes the gamer care about the character. This is the only point interrupting the gameplay's realism, as her voice is disembodied and the gamer does not personally read her diary entries. This however is solved at the end, where the gamer finds the diary entitled 'Letters to Katie,' reiterating that the game is to be read as Kaitlin's flash-back of her exploration, now reconnected with the diary entries she is reading.

Transforming a Digital House to a 'Home'?

Gone Home is a perfect example of the exploration/discovery paradigm addressed in the last chapter, with both mechanics and narrative development relying on this. The narrative itself thematises discovery and exploration not on a spatial, but on a personal and sexual level. Not only is the narrative ingrained in the gamespace; the gamespace *is* the narrative. The developers' goal was to essentially invoke a place that feels like home through familiarity with objects and the time period the game is set in. It takes place on June 7, 1995, at 1:15am. This choice was essential to the exploration and mystery part of the game; it had to be "set [...] prior to the wide use of email and text messages, so that the place would still be filled with physical notes and letters and receipts and messages."⁷⁴ Even the gameplay mechanics correspond to a feeling of home. One audio commentary explains that the 'putting objects back' rule was included so that the gamers would not need to 'clutter' the house. Furthermore, the gamer gets the feeling of being in a proper place because of the way the game interacts with them. One of the main tensions in playing the game is the issue of light: all the rooms are unlit, and the gamer can turn the lights on and off during the

⁷⁴ Alexander, 2013.

exploration process. The designers were aware of the fact that most gamers would leave the lights on, and left a remark from the father to Samantha reminding her to turn off the lights (Fig. 5). Lead designer Steve Gaynor remarks:

This was a way of saying 'we know what you're doing. We're playing back with you, not by AI dodging when you shoot a bullet, but by winking and nodding at you [...] We want you to feel like you're in a space, but also that you're playing a game, and the game is playing back with you.'⁷⁵

Another significant interference is presented by the protagonist. The basement contains a note detailing Samantha's first intercourse with Lonnie. While it is possible to pick up and read the note, it is put back after a few seconds, and Kaitlin refuses to pick it up again because it would invade Samantha's privacy (Fig. 6). This presents an unusual conflict between gamer and character.

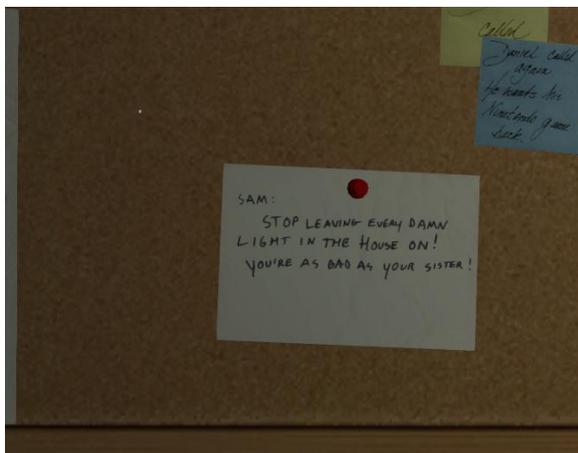


Fig. 5 The note reads: "Sam: Stop leaving every damn light in the house on! You're as bad as your sister!"

Fig. 6 Kaitlin refuses to read the note.

Home is a central aspect for human geographers, often based on the Heideggerian notion of 'dwelling.' Bachelard, for instance, sees home as a very intimate "primal space" which, because it is the first universe that we get to know, provides the framework for understanding the outside world.⁷⁶ A house/home therefore consists of several places, each with its own attachments. This is exemplified in *Gone Home*. Since it is a game and every single detail has been deliberately designed, the outside world simply does not exist. The gamer gains access to it only through the interpretation of objects and letters scattered around the home, both locally (the mother's workplace, Samantha's school, etc.) and globally (Kaitlin's postcards, Fig. 7 a-b). Familiarity is further invoked through the cultural-

⁷⁵ qtd. in Sheffield, 2013.

⁷⁶ Cresswell, 2008, p. 24.

temporal setting of the game. The designers included insider-jokes and so-called Easter eggs⁷⁷ referring specifically to the 1990s because a large part of the gaming population that the game initially addresses would still have conscious memories of this time, thus connecting the virtual reality of the game to the actual remembered memory of the gamer. In this sense, the game attempts to re-create a specific place at a specific moment in time, conjuring up the house's 'genius loci,' i.e. the specific character or "spirit of place" that is conveyed at a fixed point in time and space, and which "has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life," with all its connotations and (post-modernist) narratives.⁷⁸ The explorative and personal nature of the game has great immersive potential, which means that the gamer "quickly lose[s] track of the technology between [them] and the virtual house [...], to the point where [they] start to feel like [they]'re really in that game world and consider [their] in-game actions accordingly."⁷⁹ Madigan refers to this as 'spatial presence,' encouraged through mental representations of space, loss of media awareness, and involvement, which blurs the line between gamer and gameworld.



Fig. 7a Kaitlin finds one of her postcards

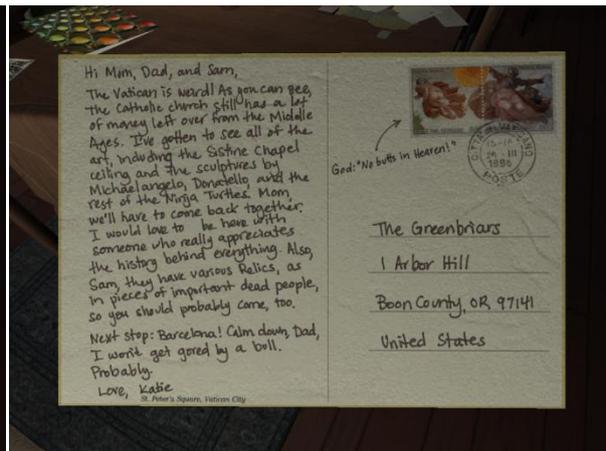


Fig. 7b The back of the postcard

⁷⁷ Little surprises for the gamer that provide references and insider jokes to popular culture, with a focus on game culture.

⁷⁸ Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Madigan, 2013.

Conclusion

Gone Home is considered one of the recent masterpieces in environmental storytelling in video games. Leaving a great deal of agency to the gamer, it is a beautifully detailed, highly personal environment that evokes a very specific time and place – a ‘genius loci.’ Most other games are set in fantasy or science fiction worlds that the gamer only has a generic connection to. Here, however, the setting conveys a high element of realism and truth by recreating a point in time from the real world. The narratives are not exceptional, dealing with everyday, easily relatable issues from teenage rebellion over mid-life crisis to marital unhappiness. The uniqueness of *Gone Home* is that the narrative is not told in a specific space; instead, the space and spatial ordering of the ‘home’ are the narrative. Only through spatiality can the narrative be unveiled. Because nothing directly happens, the space becomes the most important object of interaction for the gamer. Furthermore, the navigation through and experience of the space determine the way the narrative is being deciphered. As I have shown in the previous chapter, it is even possible to finish with a tragic suicide story rather than the intended bittersweet happy ending. The mechanics allow the gamer to truly make the place and the narrative their own. Even after finishing the main narrative, one can revisit the house and rearrange objects or continue to explore to one’s liking, creating a digital home beyond the narrative.

One question remains unanswered: is *Gone Home* a video game, considering that there is only narrative and no physical conflict? Opinions vary, but according to Steve Gaynor, this should not be a real issue: “What is important is if the experience is valuable to you or not.”⁸⁰ By blurring the lines between gamer and game, a truly immersive experience is created entirely based on environmental storytelling, tying the gamer’s experience to the gamespace. Especially in this case, it truly “makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects.”⁸¹ *Gone Home* clearly shows the narrative and immersive potential that video games have based on interactivity and spatiality, and hopefully many more games will explore this kind of interaction in the future and show video games’ potential for becoming an art form as well.

⁸⁰ qtd. in Graft, 2014.

⁸¹ Jenkins, 2004, p. 129.

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