

GDC 2015 Game Narrative Review

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Your name: Alex Shilts

Your school: Southern Methodist University Guildhall

Your email: shiltsx@gmail.com

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Game Title: *Gone Home*

Platform: Windows, Mac, Linux

Genre: Story Exploration

Release Date: August 15th, 2013

Developer: The Fullbright Company

Publisher: The Fullbright Company

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Steve Gaynor

Overview

Gone Home is a short Story Exploration game created with the Unity Engine by The Fullbright Company, founded in Oregon by Steve Gaynor. A very minimalistic experience, *Gone Home* places all of its gameplay emphasis on its story, told in its entirety through letters and recorded messages scattered around the house that serves as the entire playable area. The story begins with Kaitlin Greenbriar, a 21-year old girl who serves as the vessel for the player, arriving at her family's new house in Oregon on a dark and stormy night after a year abroad in Europe. She soon discovers that her entire family is gone, with no explanation other than a note taped to the door. This note, a hastily written message from her younger sister Sam, apologizes to Kaitlin for her absence and advises against looking for her. The player receives no other direction or context, and must explore the house to find answers. As the narrative unfolds, Kaitlin discovers that the past year has not been kind to her family, and things are very different from when she left.

Characters

- **Kaitlin “Katie” Greenbriar**
 - The eldest daughter of Terry and Jan Greenbriar and Sam's older sister; Katie serves as the player's eyes as she uncovers the events of the past year. In contrast to her confused and rebellious younger sister, she is very straight-laced, studious, and driven.
- **Samantha “Sam” Greenbriar**
 - The youngest daughter of Terry and Jan Greenbriar and Katie's younger sister; Sam is an 18-year old girl who has fallen deeply in young love with her friend Lonnie over the past year, and is the main focus of *Gone Home*'s narrative. She has a passion for writing, drawing, and music but

feels conflicted about her future and is brimming with teenage angst. When her parents eventually discover her feelings for Lonnie, they respond with denial, further pushing Sam away.

- **Terrence “Terry” Greenbriar**
 - Father of Katie and Sam and Husband to Jan Greenbriar; Terry is a writer whom released a somewhat successful set of books that have been tossed between publishers due to cult popularity. He has suffered from writer’s block for most of the past year, the struggle of which has heavily strained his marriage. He eventually proposes couples counselling as an anniversary present during the week when Katie returns.
- **Janice “Jan” Greenbriar**
 - Mother of Katie and Sam and Wife to Terry; Jan is a successful member of the State Forestry Service in Oregon. Over the past year, she and Terry have begun to grow apart, and a newly transferred Forest Ranger begins to catch her wandering eye. She loves to paint and read, and approaches motherhood very traditionally. She often prefers to avoid problems rather than confront them, especially with Sam.
- **Yolanda “Lonnie” DeSoto**
 - Sam’s best friend and eventual lover; Lonnie is an 18-year old punk girl who is enrolled at Sam’s high school and in ROTC, and hopes to one day join the army. She and Sam eventually become romantically involved, and she begins to influence Sam as a more rebellious role model. She is artistically and musically talented, but also impulsive and headstrong. Her ambition for the army becomes a main point of contention in the later sections of the story.

Breakdown

As the debut game from The Fullbright Company, *Gone Home* did not have a large budget. Because of this, Steve Gaynor decided to focus all of the attention on creating an experience that involved no other actual characters or complex gameplay, and simply had a powerful story and robust environment. This minimalist approach is what ultimately gave the game much of its identity, and allowed it to flourish as a narrative experience.

Letters, recordings, and the overall state of the environment convey the majority of the game’s narrative. The player can pick up and manipulate objects throughout the house, and is free to explore at their leisure. This is also Katie’s first time in her family’s new house, giving credence to her lack of knowledge in step with the player. Not only do this premise and the freedom given to the player sell their identity as Katie, but it also lets them deduce the events of the past year of their own accord. This provides the player with a true sense of accomplishment upon making a discovery or piecing events together on a mental timeline.

The biggest pieces of the narrative emerge in the form of letters and diary entries written by Sam that Katie finds throughout the house, each one read aloud in Sam’s voice upon acquisition. These insights into Sam’s mind and emotions appear chronologically, slowly showing both Katie and the player the roller coaster of struggles and bliss Sam experienced over the past twelve months. The monologues deal with bullying, crushes,

angst, and love, all while conveying Sam's confusion and loneliness after Katie's departure. Through these entries, the player learns of a girl named Lonnie, a punk-themed member of her school's ROTC, who grabs Sam's attention in a way she has yet to experience. In the beginning, Sam's attraction to Lonnie is purely platonic but quickly becomes much more, and eventually blossoms into a romantic relationship. This begins to change the girls in both positive and negative ways. Sam begins to write with more confidence from Lonnie's support, but also becomes more rebellious, sneaking out to punk concerts and having altercations at school. Lonnie becomes the lead singer of a punk girl band at Sam's urging, but becomes more violent toward their classmates that harass Sam. These changes eventually get unwanted attention from her parents that causes problems later in the story. Sam and Lonnie's experiences form both the central focus and conflict of the narrative, further fueled by Sam's parent's close-minded views on gay relationships and Lonnie's plans to enter the military after high school. Sam's experiences are universal, dealing with desire for acceptance, fear of being alone, and the wonderfully horrible complications of teenage life.

Another strong aspect of the storytelling is a look into Sam's childhood through school assignments scattered throughout the house. The player finds drawings and stories created by Sam in Kindergarten, as well as incrementally complex stories that she writes during both middle and early high school. It becomes clear that Sam takes after her father as a writer, which not only deepens the familiar resemblance and makes Sam's character more believable but also gives us insight towards Sam's thoughts concerning self-identity and romance. As a child, Sam writes epic tales of a swashbuckling pirate queen and her trusty male first mate, which becomes a likely allegory for her and her childhood next-door neighbor and friend Daniel for whom she had "puppy love". However, as time progresses, later versions of the story find the pirate queen and first mate becoming more romantically involved, and the turning point in Sam's sexual identity occurs in one of the final stories when the first mate is literally turned into a woman by Amazonians using a bizarre ritual, symbolizing Sam's emerging feelings for Lonnie. References to these stories surface all over the house in the forms of drawings and letters, and at one point Katie can even find a set of Halloween costumes that Sam had sewn for her and Lonnie, with Sam as the pirate queen and Lonnie as the first mate.

Several side stories also make an appearance throughout the house. Katie's father Terry, who has had two books published with diminishing success, fell prey to writer's block for several months and regained his inspiration after a smaller company republished his books. Evidence of his struggles and failures are present all over the house, represented by piles of his unsold books and empty bottles of whiskey. Her mother Jan has been drifting apart from her father due to his frustration with writing, and has begun taking an interest in a new Forest Ranger that recently transferred. She even makes an effort to have the new Ranger stay in Oregon permanently by requesting a transfer of his services. Katie eventually learns that Oscar Mason, the previous owner of the house and Terry's uncle, left the house to Terry shortly before committing suicide and earning the abode the local nickname "The Psycho House", which gets Sam both unwanted attention at school and wanted early attention from Lonnie. *Gone Home* does an excellent job of connecting all of its tangled story webs together in interesting ways and giving the world a feeling of occupancy.

While the story told through the letters and diary entries is well crafted and expressed, one of the best narrative tools *Gone Home* uses is the house itself. The lights flicker on and off, lighting thunders outside, and the house even creaks and moans, giving the structure credence as an old and creepy house. There are even receipts from electricians complaining about the house's poor wiring, giving the outside world a layer of depth. Every room in the home feels genuinely lived-in, and arrangements of objects and furniture naturally tell their own story. A perfect early example is the living room, which has a small couch cushion fort that houses a book on poltergeists, which is the player's introduction to Sam's interest in the occult. There are also several maps scattered across the house that point to hidden spaces behind wall panels and secret passageways, both giving the level design more versatility and making the house's old architecture more engaging. The Fullbright Company managed to replicate the feelings of unease and suspense many people get when they explore an old house, especially during a storm, which helps to immerse the player in Katie's world.

Strongest Element

One of *Gone Home*'s most unique and engaging narrative elements is its sense of discovery. The game provides little to no explicit direction to the player and encourages thorough exploration and interaction within its highly detailed world. The level design and environmental narrative give the house a sense of life and history, and instill deep meaning into many of the seemingly meaningless objects you find. The house itself is as much a storyteller as the diary entries and letters encountered throughout the game. Every room tells a story, and every story raises more questions that pull you even deeper into the experience.

Unsuccessful Element

The only aspect of *Gone Home*'s presentation that is remotely lacking is certain somewhat under-developed side stories that the player can encounter throughout the experience. The game explores the main story of Sam and Lonnie's relationship and their struggles as a lesbian couple so deeply and fully that some of the smaller side stories seem weak in comparison. Certain side narratives such as the events that unfolded from Terry's writer's block and book troubles are very interesting, but others like Jan's attraction to the new Ranger and the relationship between Terry and Oscar Mason, his uncle that left him the house, seem largely glossed over. The game only hints at these relationships and never fleshes them out, and they could have potentially added new layers to the overall narrative if given enough time and exposure.

Highlight

Gone Home's most memorable and definitive moment is its awe-inspiringly powerful ending. After following the evidence left by Sam's enchanting disaster of a year across the house, everything the player has discovered and learned about her uncertainty, struggles, and blooming love for Lonnie comes together perfectly in a final note found in the attic. Surrounded by pictures and drawings depicting Sam's heartbreak over Lonnie's departure, the note tells of Lonnie's last minute decision to abandon everything she has been working towards in the army to be with Sam. She calls in tears from a payphone

after getting off the bus to basic training, asking Sam if she will pick her up and drive them somewhere that can be just for them. In the recording, Sam responds simply, “Yes”, as every trouble caused by confusion, heartbreak, and bigoted parents melt away from her voice. The story’s ending is one of the main reasons that the game is so deeply memorable, and is worthy of a period of stunned silence as the credits roll.

Critical Reception

Gone Home received much critical acclaim for its storytelling and design, earning it a Metacritic score of 86. Many reviews addressed the relatable experiences, deep characters, and masterful narrative, and to date the game has sold more than 250,000 copies. In addition to a multitude of indie awards, *Gone Home* took home *Polygon*’s Game of the Year award for 2013 and Best Debut Title from *BAFTA*.

Polygon’s review [1], written by Danielle Riendeau, praises the game for its hands-free implementation that gives the player freedom, and for its simple premise and mechanics. Riendeau also discusses the game’s attention to detail and saturation with 1990’s nostalgia, as well as the clever level design and the universally relatable experiences and motifs. “*Gone Home* proves that a game focused on story and exploration, starring a decidedly non-traditional cast of characters, can be utterly thrilling....After completing the game, I sat spellbound, smiling silence for nearly an hour, and that’s perhaps the greatest praise I can lay upon a game.” *Polygon* gave *Gone Home* a perfect 10/10.

IGN’s review [2], written by Marty Sliva, settled on a score of 9.5/10, and had much of the same praise as *Polygon*’s review. While many of the items the player handles in the environment became somewhat repetitive, the attention to detail was still astounding and the items themselves invoked many childhood memories. Sliva also commented on the warm and lived-in feel of each room, as well as the constant sense of dread caused by the storm and age of the house. “Games like *The Last of Us* and *BioShock Infinite* allow us to explore exceptionally realized worlds, but *Gone Home*’s world just feels straight-up real.” The excellent music and attention to detail received praise as well, accompanied by a revealing example in which Sliva found a pile of dirty magazines underneath a pile of Terry’s failed books during the review playthrough.

However, there were also many reviews, more commonly by players than recognized critics, which heavily deducted points from *Gone Home* due to its LGBT agenda. Many criticisms dismissed the experience for being “just another Lesbian game”, or ignored its story because the game was too short. It was also criticized for its minimalistic gameplay, being boring for many players as “a low-budget indie walking simulator”, which alienated many of the players who often play action-oriented games such as the *Call of Duty* and *Halo* series. *Gone Home* is obviously not a game for everyone, but has thankfully received much attention for the hard work The Fullbright Company put into it.

Despite some widely divided opinions on the game’s core subject matter, very few critics denied that *Gone Home* exhibited very high-quality storytelling and design. Steve Gaynor and his team poured themselves into their work, and it shows in the quality of the experience. Among the game’s most recognized qualities were its engaging writing and the fully realized environments that made it very easy for players to lose themselves in

the unnervingly realistic world, as well as an ending that is likely to stick with many players for years to come.

Lessons

- **Quality, not quantity.**
 - *Gone Home* did one thing masterfully. It focused all of its attention on its storytelling, which ended up polished to a brilliant sheen. Too many games try to appeal to too many different gamers, and *Gone Home* stands as a monumental testament to the phrase “Less is more”. The rich story and deep world let the player fall into the experience and never give them a reason to climb back out until the story ends.
- **Games do not need explicit direction or narration to convey a powerful story.**
 - *Gone Home* did extremely little handholding and benefitted greatly from it, allowing the player to discover the story themselves. This made the journey through the house feel surprisingly personal and created a more immersive experience.
- **More gameplay and robust mechanics are not required for a quality narrative.**
 - The player could only interact with objects and move. Minimalist gameplay allowed The Fullbright Company much more focus on the story events and character development, and did very little to distract the player from the narrative.
- **A game does not have to be long to be memorable.**
 - Despite being on average between two and four hours long, *Gone Home* has won countless awards and received very high critical acclaim. The ending and narrative quality has made it one of the most memorable games of 2013, and one of the best narrative experiences of the past decade.
- **A robust world is nothing without robust occupants, even if the player never meets them.**
 - The characters’ reactions, interactions, and behavior in the events told through *Gone Home*’s environment solidify the world as believable and give the player a reason to push the narrative forward. The story would have failed completely without people to connect with and conflicts both interesting and relatable. Despite never seeing these characters in person, the knowledge of their existence is enough for the human mind to create a living, breathing imaginary world.

Summation

Gone Home sets the standard for interactive storytelling in many ways. The Fullbright Company has created a fully realized world and populated with believable and interesting characters. The story is extremely well told, powerful, and immersive, and manages to do so without support from complex gameplay or innovative controls. There is no blood, body count, guns or superpowers, and yet every single moment of *Gone Home*'s experience is engaging and immersive. The narrative, both varied and focused, houses fear, joy, sadness, confusion, and anger that feel truly real and highly relatable. However, the cherry atop the experience is the peaceful and moving ending that wraps every small story Sam tells in a comforting blanket of acceptance. The Fullbright Company has shown the gaming world what they can do, and have set the bar high for their future work.

References

- [1] *Polygon's Gone Home* Review: Living Room
 - <http://www.polygon.com/2013/8/15/4620172/gone-home-review-if-these-walls-could-talk>
- [2] *IGN's Gone Home* Review: Grown Up Games
 - <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/08/15/gone-home-review>