Gone Home, Playful Narratives and Classroom (de)Constructions of Contemporary Culture

Discussant: David Simkins, Rochester Institute of Technology
Kelly Bergstrom, York University
Negin Dahya, York University
Paul Darvasi, Royal St. George's College
Jennifer Jenson, York University

Gone Home is a first person exploration game that unearths a compelling family drama by means of discovering documents, artifacts and personal possessions. Players unravel a family's history that includes a queer young person "coming out", a depressed and alcoholic parent, and another implicated in infidelity as well as spousal neglect. It is a highly visual, interactive and non-linear narrative that unfolds through user exploration of a family's home. Lauded by critics as breaking new ground, *Gone Home* is an ideal example of a game's power to relate a compelling story. In this panel discussion, the presenters explore intriguing directions for the future of games and learning in formal and informal schooling through narrative-based play.

Panel Overview

This panel provides a unique opportunity to bring together three perspectives relating to games and learning: the developers of *Gone Home*, a teacher who used the game as part of a high school English class, and a team of university researchers with a focus on learning through play who observed the classroom where *Gone Home* was played and deconstructed as text. Using this particular game as our touchstone, we hope this panel will foster a lively discussion between both panelists and audience about the role of narrative driven games in education.

Making *Gone Home*

Gone Home was created on a tight budget by a small team led by Steve Gaynor and Karla Zimanji. The creators met while working on *Bioshock 2* from which they imported many elements of the mainstream title to the narrower precincts of this indie enterprise. Whenever possible, they shaped their financial and technological limitations to their advantage by focusing on storytelling above all else. They strategically set the game in the 90's to encourage interaction with diverse objects and documents, as modern gadgets might be seen to collapse revelatory gameplay into scrolling through text messages and emails. Action was limited to a single home in real time, producing a focused and realistic experience of discovery. Making the old mansion gloomy, and the dark rural night stormy, masked graphic limitations and invoked elements of the horror genre to keep players on edge and unsettled. Where players expect ghosts, they discover skeletons in the closet and a family haunted by its past.

Gone Home as a Classroom Text

Gone Home was selected as a substitute for a traditional English text and implemented as such without modification to the game and with a particular focus on developing a curriculum that framed the game as a narrative text. It was apt for classroom use in terms of both functionality and content. Unlike many long-form narrative games, it has a user-friendly interface and can be comfortably played in less than three hours. *Gone Home* does not progress on a reward schedule of levels, points and achievements and, as a result, creates a fluid and non-competitive gameplay experience. It is void of gratuitous sex and violence, and its basic premise of environmental storytelling yields ample opportunity to discuss setting, character, and a consideration of linear and non-linear narrative – fundamental concepts in any secondary school literature class. Its reliance on a diverse and realistic assortment of historically situated documents also expose students to a variety of more traditional written voices and forms.

The teacher implemented response strategies included an "annotation" of a single room, individual tracking assignments based on prominent themes recurrent in the game, considerations of tone and mood, game review writing and publication, and group presentations. A combination of screenshots and notes were employed to unpack the first room they entered, which acquainted them with all the main characters, basic gameplay and the ability to take in-game screenshots. Students selected tracking topics and, as they played, took relevant notes and screenshots. Topics included gathering information on specific character arcs; 1995 Archeology, objects from the game space set in 1995; Riot Girl pop culture which informs the main storyline; and the multimedia layering of other videogame references subtly woven throughout the house.

These directed activities encouraged purposeful and deliberate exploration, without restricting player agency. After

the gameplay phase, players were grouped together according to topic and collaborated on presentations that were delivered to the rest of the class. Finally, they read examples of game reviews, and wrote their own which they then published in video game websites such as Metacritic, Gamespot and IGN.

Researching *Gone Home*

Among the earliest forms of computer-supported games are RPGs (Bartle, 2010). Central to this genre is the ability to follow and to tell a compelling story (Murray, 1999; Jenkins, 2004; Heliö, 2004). Our interest in studying RPGs relates to the development of narrative and story writing competencies, the primary learning outcomes for literature, language and expressive arts, and communications, by examining the pedagogical affordances of the uniquely narrative experiences these games provide (Heliö, 2004). However, these narrative experiences can be overshadowed by a game's mechanics, as was the experience of Dickey (2011) who found that some of her students overly focused on finding the "game" elements of *Murder on Grimm Isle*, rather piecing together a story. While critics have lauded *Gone Home* for its ability to tell a compelling story, players have criticized it for being *not* a game. In our classroom observations, a very similar debate played out and in this panel discussion we will address the relationship between game procedures (Bogost, 2007), learning (Gee, 2007), and narrative play (Jenkins, 2004).

Considering the increasing importance of multimodal discourse in 21st century learning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), the authors focus on the interpretation of multimodal discourse as a narrative form in gameplay. Based on participant observations collected by four researchers over two weeks, the authors discuss how students in this all male private school engaged in critical discussions about feminism, popular culture and social activism, the recent history of technology, character development, the importance of home/place, and sexuality through their gaming experience with *Gone Home*. In particular, the focus of this discussion will be on explorative capabilities embedded in narrative play and the reconstructive possibilities associated with a textual deconstruction (in the form of literary analysis) of videogame narratives. How do players engage with the life history of the lead game character in *Gone Home*? How is the game's non-linear narrative experienced by players, and how do they relate their experiences of that narrative?

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