CHAPTER 7.

GONE HOME AND THE APOCALYPSE OF HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH

BY PAUL DARVASI

Late in the summer of 2013, a review of the indie video game *Gone Home* crossed my Twitter feed. The game received a perfect score on Polygon and the reviewer could barely contain her excitement, gushing praises such as "spellbound," "beautifully written," "universal experience," and "emotionally honest." I did a double take. Was this a video game critique or a book review? I dug a little deeper and Googled a few more reviews and was met with similarly enthusiastic reactions. The critic at *The New York Times* went so far as to say that it was the "closest thing to literary realism I've encountered in a video game." Praise aside, it sounded like no other game I'd ever played, and I've played quite a few. As a busy dad and English teacher, I was further encouraged that it could be completed in less than three hours. My interest was most definitely piqued.

In a mainstream gaming world crowded with assault rifles and fireballs, there was something refreshingly simple and humane about the premise of *Gone Home*. It's set in 1995, and the player assumes the role of 19-year-old Katie Greenbriar, who has returned home after a year of backpacking in Europe. While she was tramping around Paris and Amsterdam, her family inherited and moved into a big old mansion on the outskirts of her Oregon town.

The game opens when Katie arrives from the airport to the unfamiliar house at 1 a.m. only to discover that nobody is home. She's in the mansion's covered front porch, it's pitch-black outside, and a thunderstorm rages. Katie drops her bags and finds an enigmatic and worrisome note from her younger sister, Sam, pinned to the front door (see Figure 1). The note sets up the game's key conflicts—where are Sam and her parents? What happened to the family while Katie was away? What secrets are harbored in the family's new home? Will she encounter ghosts and ghouls on this dark and stormy night, or maybe some family skeletons in the closet?

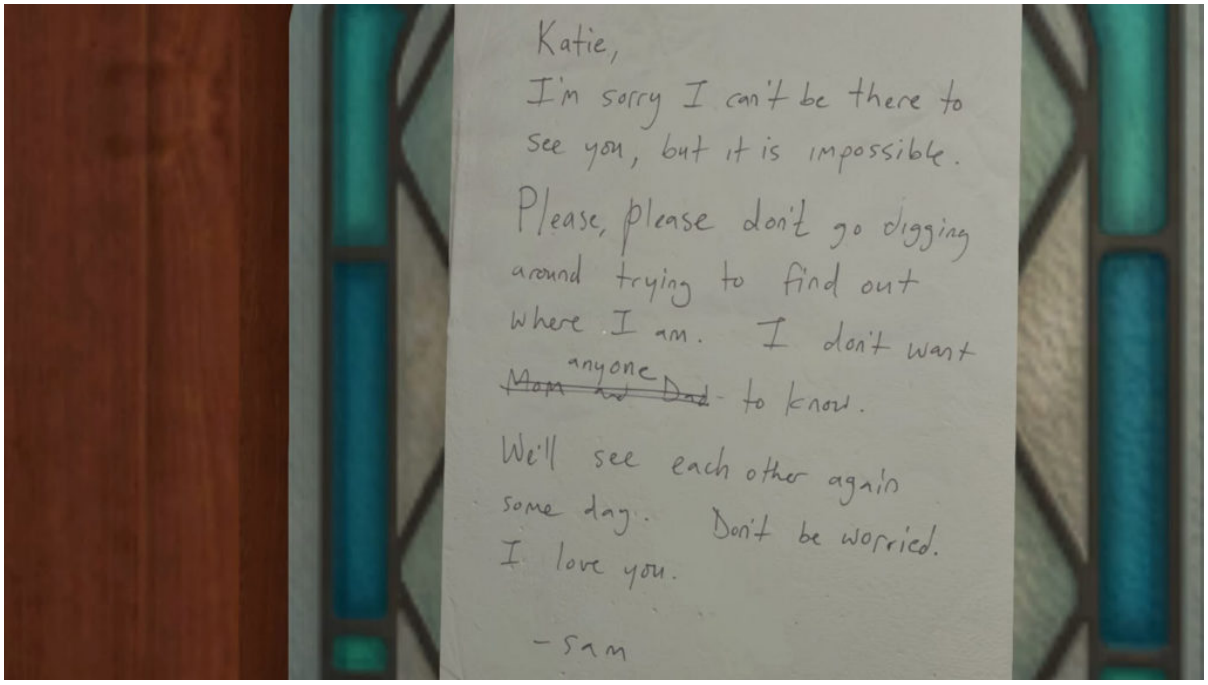


Figure 1. Sam's note for Katie.

Once you figure out how to unlock the front door, the next few hours are spent wandering around hunting for answers. Remember, this is 1995—no Facebook, Skype, or even the widespread use of email. Katie's communication with her family was bottlenecked to a few scattered postcards, so she's been largely in the dark about her family's life since her departure. You wander around rummaging through closets, drawers, and boxes, where you find realistic documents and personal possessions. The items all act as small windows into the Greenbriars' private lives and gradually reveal an intersecting web of family secrets. There was a great and guilty pleasure in being licensed to intrude into a family's private life. I was a burglar and a detective, a family outsider and insider—a stranger in my own home.

The game yielded a rich, layered, and emotional experience not unlike a captivating short story or novella, with the key difference being that I was an agent in the narrative. I was impressed by how much I came to care about a family that I'd met only by way of their personal possessions. I echo what one of my students would later observe about the game: This type of dynamic would not work as well in a novel or film. This video game had staked out narrative territory where its more traditional literary forerunners could not follow.

THE LIGHTBULB

Fast-forward to September, and I am on the cusp of resuming my duties as a high school English teacher. I'm always on the lookout for fresh ways to keep my classes relevant and meaningful. My first love has always been literature, but I am also an avid gamer. For years, I'd been seeking an opportunity to marry the two, but I hadn't come close to figuring out what that would look like. Games that had worthwhile narratives were usually clouded by gratuitous violence, and most video games were of unwieldy lengths. Then the lightbulb lit up—why not use *Gone Home* as a text for my senior English class?

It ticked all the boxes. Baseline, it was devoid of graphic violence, gratuitous sex, and gender bias. From a technical perspective, the game is relatively inexpensive, and the graphics would not tax our school laptops. Many commercial video games offer hundreds of hours of gameplay, which would not work for my purposes, but *Gone Home* could be completed in a few hours. I also liked the absence of extrinsic motivators—no levels, points, gold, or zombies—just good ol'-fashioned interactive play.

Functionally, it had legs, but how would it fit as part of my English curriculum? As a text, it exemplified the literary strategy of revealing character through setting. Its prolific and diverse documents might help instruct on how the conventions of language change, depending on intent and purpose. The nuances of each character yield ample ground for analysis. The game's emphasis on coming out, adolescent romance, and rebellion would resound with my high school students and ideally prompt some meaningful discussions. *Gone Home* also opens the door to delve into nonlinear narrative, and how a coherent story can be told without railroading a reader along a set path. Finally, the lit geek in me was happy to note that the game fulfilled Aristotle's dictums of the three classical unities more successfully than any of Shakespeare's plays.

I drafted the course outline for my 2013–2014 senior English class and, with some trepidation, I slipped *Gone Home* in somewhere between a short-story unit and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. There was no backing out now. I was sure most of my students would be happy. Even if they didn't like the game, it would be a matter of principle: We get to play video games for English homework? Bring it!!! But just because they like it doesn't mean they'll learn anything. Video games definitely have the engagement part locked up, but educators who use games often find it hard to ascertain and prove the pedagogical value of the experience. Assessment is a big question when using video games in the classroom. What do they learn? How do we measure what they learn? What are valid and suitable forms of assessment? For the time being, I pushed these questions out of my head and assured myself that I would figure it out … later.

And what about Mom and Dad? There is an innate suspicion of video games, even as a form of entertainment. Parents often battle to pry their kids away from the screen and back to the books. Now, their children's so-called English teacher (of all people!) was usurping literature with video games? What happened to walking on desks, O *Captain! My Captain!,* and teary-eyed recitations of Sylvia Plath?

Thankfully, I didn't have to dance too much to convince the parents in my community of the validity of the enterprise. I was honest—this might or might not work, but it won't take up too much time and they will think critically and write throughout. I sold it as a short story masquerading as a video game. A few eyebrows were raised, but most questions revolved around the technical aspects of acquiring and installing the game. In the end, there wasn't a single objection.

VIDEO GAME AS TEXT

With the first major hurdle cleared, I now had to confront the daunting task of hashing out the specifics of how the unit would play out. Would I let my students wander the house freely? Would I somehow direct their gameplay? Aside from playing the game, what would the response apparatus look like? How would I assess and evaluate them? On one hand, this was a lit class and I could

approach it much like a short-novel study, but this seemed a bit of a cop-out; a video game, after all, is formally different from a literary text, and it should be examined and considered in its own light.

A cultural theorist would tell you that, much like songs, TV shows, and comic books, video games are cultural artifacts and can be considered texts in their own right. Like novels or other literary texts, video games operate on a symbolic level, employ rhetorical strategies, and can be "read" or interpreted for meaning. A consideration of figures of speech and literary devices and the unique properties of a literary text are diluted (but not entirely lost). However, video games furnish opportunities not typically available in a literary text: choice and agency, exploration, a sense of embodiment, and a visual reinforcement of the narrative. We can safely say that the reception of a video game involves a type of literacy and is worthy of critical analysis, as Dr. James Paul Gee entertainingly and persuasively argues in his classic *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.

A video game's unique technical and formal features invite a fittingly unique response mechanism. It would be an easy and valid activity for students to write analytical essays about their experience, but I wanted to take a more creative approach. A film isn't studied in the same way as a novel and, likewise, a video game should be examined with its own distinct set of considerations. Sad to say, I wasn't altogether clear on how to productively emphasize and leverage the unique textual features of *Gone Home* and still deliver a valuable and pedagogically sound lesson. I decided that my best bet was to dive into an "in-depth" replay (dare I say close reading?) of the game that would, I hoped, trigger a few lesson plan ideas.

REPLAYING, NOT PLAYING, IS WHAT COUNTS

By a stroke of luck, Fullbright added a developers' commentary feature to *Gone Home* just a few weeks before our scheduled classroom launch date. When activated, Fullbright's trademark cartoony lightbulbs appear at set locations throughout the Greenbriar mansion (see Figure 2). Clicking on a bulb icon triggers an audio commentary from members of the creative team providing insights into their process. They discuss music, sound, technical elements, hidden content, and development anecdotes—usually related to the space where the specific bulb appears. This was solid gold!I now had a whole new layer of material that I could mine for the unit.

Figure 2. Developers' commentary lightbulb icons in Sam's room.

I'd played the game twice casually, but it was now time to dig into the nitty-gritty details. I woke up early one Sunday morning, set myself up at the kitchen table with a hot cup of java, and undertook a meticulous inspection of the creepy old mansion. I activated the developers' commentary mode and methodically explored every corner of the house, dividing my notes according to room and creating a comprehensive inventory of every meaningful artifact. I also jotted down anything valuable I could glean from the commentary. Seven hours later, I'd found just about every bookmark, sticky note, and newspaper clipping and felt intimately familiar with the game. By this point, I could probably better orient myself in the Greenbriar household than my own. Despite my thorough CSI-style sweep of the place, my students would later find a number of items and details that had slipped through my fingers.

In all honesty, I wasn't thrilled at the idea of retreading every inch of the big ol' Greenbriar mansion. I'd already played twice, but I thought this third forensic run would be a bit painstaking and laborious. Happily, I was wrong. The time flew by, the developers' commentary was extremely engaging, and I discovered many new details that I'd missed the first two times around. I was reminded of a quote by one of my favorite writers—Jorge Luis Borges—"rereading, not reading, is what counts." The scheme had yielded fruit—a few exciting assessment ideas had percolated and a vision for the lesson began to materialize.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO A VIDEO GAME

My goal for the first lesson was to acquaint my students with the game's style, get them comfortable with the controls and interface, and introduce the story's main characters—the Greenbriar family. I thought that starting with the common literature-studies strategy of an annotation and close-ish reading (or close playing) would encourage an initial detail-oriented examination of the game. Annotations and close readings are two fairly common practices in high school and college-level

lit classes. Annotation essentially involves scribbling notes, underlines, highlights, symbols, and observations directly onto the text. It's interactive and helps reinforce an attention to detail that supports a close reading, which is an analysis and interpretation of a passage.

Like many high school English teachers, I've employed this approach when teaching a novel, poem, or short story, and I thought that it might also prove useful for the study of this video game. The problem was how would students annotate when the "text" in question is a three-dimensional digital space? Not having access to a digital tool that allows students to insert their thoughts and notes directly into the game space, I improvised.

As I mentioned earlier, *Gone Home* begins on the enclosed porch of the Greenbriar home, and once a player walks through the front door he or she enters a large foyer—the hub of the sprawling mansion (see Figure 3). The foyer has a few features that distinguish it from the other rooms in the house. First, it's a sort of dramatis personae, as all the major characters are introduced by way of documents, voice recordings, and artifacts dispersed throughout the room. Also, players must necessarily traverse this room first before choosing to head up the main staircase or down the west hall on their self-selected paths. This makes it an ideal site to introduce the game. It was the perfect room (or "passage") in which to center the first lesson. I aimed for my students to play freely and force their hands as little as possible. Open exploration, after all, is a key to engagement. Otherwise, if I overly controlled or restricted their movements, it would suck the fun right out of the experience. I requested that my students, for this first class only, stick to the foyer and abstain from exploring the rest of the house, which wouldn't railroad them so much as slow them down.

Figure 3. The Greenbriar foyer.

So I had my textual passage, but how to annotate it? I designed a chart that prompted the students to find specific information about each of the major characters. The last column in the chart was reserved for screen shots of the artifact or document that had furnished the requested information

(see Figure 4). The chart encouraged a methodical and guided exploration in a contained space. It familiarized the students with the Greenbriar family, the *Gone Home*'s artifact-based exploration mechanics, and the game's controls. It also allowed them to practice gathering evidence by means of in-game screen shots. They would continue to take screen shots for the activities that followed, so the sooner they learned, the better.

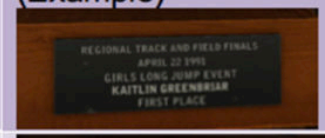
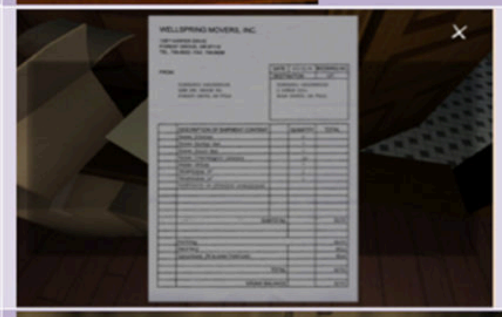
Description	Response	Screenshot evidence
(Example) Avatar's name	(Example) Kaitlin Greenbriar	(Example) 
Father's full name	Terry Greenbriar	
Mother's full name	Janice Greenbriar	

Figure 4. A completed foyer annotation chart.

When writing critically about a literary text, cited quotes are used as evidence to support arguments, claims, and propositions. This can also work with video games, as they can include written and spoken narrative and dialogue. When studying a game such as *Gone Home*, however, I thought that screen shots and video captures were a logical addition to the citation toolbox, as they are an efficient means by which to extract specific evidence from a digital medium that is primarily visual. Screen shots also support and expand on traditional note taking, as they help record and document important and relevant highlights of the player's journey.

LAUNCH DAY

Most of the class remembered to bring the headsets and mice that I'd requested, and I had a few extras for anybody who forgot or didn't have them available. We have a 1:1 laptop program, so I asked my students to download the game in advance on their machines, but, somewhat predictably, a number showed up unprepared and spent about half the class installing it. Some of those who did have it ready to go were getting stuck on the cassette-load screen. One kid quickly surmised that the graphics settings had to be set on "low" for the game to advance smoothly. Nothing like the collective classroom intelligence to solve a technical issue! *Gone Home* is not a taxing game hardware-wise, but some of our laptops, especially the older ones, have a rather limited processing capacity. Personally, I couldn't see the difference in graphics between the high and low setting.

It wasn't long before they were nosing around the foyer, taking screen shots, and filling in their charts. Once they were in the flow, the they became eerily quiet as they became absorbed in snooping and rummaging. The silence was occasionally punctuated by students' audibly murmuring to themselves as they played: "Hmmm—what's this?" or "Goodfellow High School, eh." or "That's pretty sick." or "Finally! There it is." I had to remind a few students to stay within the confines of the foyer when I caught them crossing into other areas of the house. It's interesting to note that almost all the students who transgressed outside the foyer were the ones I know to be the hard-core gamers. I wondered, in chicken-and-egg fashion, if these game aficionados were hardwired to push boundaries, subvert authority and explore, and therefore take to video games, or that their experience with games had fostered an eagerness to break out and explore. For most of the lesson, I just sat at the back of the class, very much the guide on the side, watching my students immersed in their games, each approaching it in his or her unique way.

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ORDERING THE FREE-ROVING CHAOS

For the first class, student in-game movements were limited to the foyer, but now we were about to embark on open exploration in which they could wander around as they pleased. This was the real test: How would they handle the newfound freedom? On a personal teacherly level, this marked an almost total loss of control. Some worst-case scenarios had been percolating: They might run around the mansion, entering every bedroom and closet, but not bother to read the documents or examine the items that contribute to the deliberate unfolding of the story. They could miss important clues or figure out how to finish the game in a 47-second "speed run." There was also the possibility that they might devise some unintended forms of amusement, such as transporting every single item in the mansion and adding it to a big pile in a bathroom.

Let's face it; at worst schools are extremely controlling environments. Clocks, bells, and schedules regulate time, and space is marshaled by constraining learners to classrooms and seats. These systems of control have the objective of creating uniformity, making sure that all students have the same experience and, ideally, acquire the prescribed knowledge in the same way. This is a carryover from our industrial past. Yes, things are slowly improving as concepts such as differentiated instruction and student-centered learning enter the edusphere, but the underlying apparatus remains largely unchanged.

Whether conscious or not and whether willing or not, as teachers we are all too frequently the product and perpetrators of this system. We pull levers, we release valves, we adjust dials, and, if the product is deemed defective, we toss it off the conveyor belt. We have to assert control to maintain order, to fulfill our legal obligations, to parcel out specific knowledge at a specific time, and to make sure that our charges are more or less given the same opportunity to learn the same material. It is extremely difficult to resist the machinations of mass-produced education. I openly confess that I can be and have been a controlling teacher, and a video game has caused me to reflect and reconsider this failing.

CUTTING PAPER FLOWERS OR PLANTING SEEDS

Marshall McLuhan, aptly nicknamed the Oracle of the Electronic Age, once wrote that "the notion that free-roving students would loose chaos on a school comes only from thinking of education in the present mode – as teaching rather than learning" (p. 25).[1] So what's the difference between teaching and learning? And, what does it have to do with "free-roving" kids' running around, whether in the digital mansion in *Gone Home* or the real world?

Through the years, I've taught many Shakespeare plays, including several kicks at the *Hamlet* can. For me, every line of the play is candy-coated confection that I seek to share with my students. In the past, I've wanted to teach them to see everything I see and to know everything I know about the nuances and rhythms of the language, the subtle allusions, the weave of motifs, and the compelling characters. I've wanted to impress my template of knowledge wholesale on each of their plasticine brains. Fine and dandy, but here's the rub—their brains aren't plasticine. They do have a high degree of malleability but, like snowflakes, each brain is different with its unique form and pressure and, for all my efforts, those brains will never receive information uniformly. There is only one play titled *Hamlet*, but every single mind will seize and imagine it differently, which may be why Prince Hamlet memorably proclaims, "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space." The prince is tightly bound by the unchanging text, but he will be imagined in an infinite number of ways, my conception being only one.

Yes, my passion and love of the play is a good thing and it's important for them to see it, but I know from years of experience that passion is not taught, passion is learned, and, in McLuhan's use of the terms, there's a big chasm between the two. In my case, my passion largely stems from what I have arrived at on my own, not from where I was tenderly led by the nose.

As much as our system imposes the contrary, meaningful learning happens on its own clock. We should not aim to cut paper flowers but, instead, practice the patient botanical art of planting seeds and nursing saplings. Those who are interested and dedicated will eventually get there in their own good time, and those who are not will at least have a general sense of the material and will, one hopes, find fulfillment elsewhere. Learning is always better absorbed and more meaningful when arrived at by genuine, self-motivated discovery rather than imposition. Ideally, we make allowances for individual choices and interpretations, but we also provide guidance, direction, feedback, and scaffolding. Rather than lead the expedition, it may be better to give them flashlights, compasses, and

1. McLuhan, M., & Leonard, G. B. (1967). The future of education: The class of 1989. Look, February 21, 23-25.

maps and allow for some "free-roving" explorations of Elsinore Castle and environs, your school's neighborhood or, in this case, the old Greenbriar mansion in *Gone Home*.

1995 ARCHAEOLOGY, TRACKING RIOT GRRRL, AND INTERTEXTUAL SALAD DRESSING

When thinking about how to structure the gameplay phase of *Gone Home*, I formulated a few schemes to ensure that my students discovered and read every sticky note, letter, document, and postcard. But where is the fun in that? The very idea of an ensured discovery is contrived, controlling, and counter to *Gone Home*'s primary engagement mechanism: free and open exploration. I eventually abandoned this tack and opted for a course that would support their exploration of the home but not determine their path.

I presented the class a choice of six possible topics to "track" as they played. Students would select a topic that interested them and undertake an exercise in focused evidence gathering. The tracking assignments allowed for unguided but purposeful exploration. Students could travel where they pleased, but they were mindful of finding, noting, and documenting artifacts that supported their topic. It was the natural extension of the annotation exercise in the foyer, and I reasoned that by furnishing them with a choice of topic they would take greater ownership of their learning. The six topics were:

Terrance Greenbriar (M), Uncle Oscar (m), Dr. Richard Greenbriar (m)

- Janice Greenbriar (M), Rick (m), Terrance (m)
- Sam (M), Lonnie (m), Daniel (m)
- 1995 Archaeology
- Riot Grrrl References
- Video Game References

The first three options involved character tracking. I grouped one major character (M) with the two minor characters (m) that I thought best supported and fed into the major character's story arc. 1995 Archaeology entailed noting, gathering, and researching artifacts endemic to the mid-'90s, a task that would be of interest to history and pop culture buffs and would encourage a consideration of the historical and physical setting of the story. Riot Grrrl References appealed to students interested in music and music history and allowed them to consider why Sam was drawn to a West Coast feminist punk movement. Finally, the Video Game References option proved enticing to the gamers. Interestingly, one might be tempted to dismiss this final video game topic as the most nonliterary, but I would argue the opposite.

Most literary works are referential systems, containing allusion to myths, biblical stories, and other works of culture and literature. These references enrich the text and often act as a nod to the sources that inspired the creation of the work. This type of intertextuality is by no means exclusive to literature, as fine art, film, music, and other cultural texts often do the same. Similarly, *Gone Home* is replete with both subtle and ostensible references to the video games and genres that preceded it and contributed to its creation. Uncovering these secret references adds an extra dimension of depth and

entertainment to the gameplay experience, especially for the gamers in the class who connect to the works being referenced. The in-game references also open a door to discuss why they are included in the game, which can be extended to a consideration of how intertextuality works in other cultural products and texts. Students may not always be fascinated by why John Milton nods to the book of Job in *Paradise Lost*, but they may be keen to discover why game developer Ken Levine is referenced on a salad dressing bottle in the Greenbriar pantry (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Salad dressing referencing Ken Levine's BioShock Infinite in Gone Home.

I introduced the class to the six tracking topics with a handout and had students select their choice through a show of hands. Remarkably, I had to do very little rearranging as all three of my classes naturally distributed themselves fairly evenly across all six topics. I don't imagine this will always be the case, but I was happy it worked out that way. Once the topics were set, I explained that when the gameplay phase was completed, students would be grouped together according to the topics they chose and collaborate on a group presentation to share their findings with the rest of the class. This would be a good way for the entire class to have an in-depth look at the game from a variety of perspectives.

Some chose to play without interruption and leave the screen shots and notes until later, while others took notes and screen shots as they played the first time through. I provided a topic-tracking sheet for anybody who wanted to use it, but it was optional. They could gather and organize their data as they saw fit. In essence, I tried to insert myself as little as possible. We hadn't quite torn down the classroom walls, but I watched each player running around freely in the old mansion, jotting notes, taking screen shots, and exploring closets. They were essentially nomads hunting and gathering in an information environment—activities that fulfill McLuhan's prediction of retribalization in the digital age.

PARTING THE CLOUDS OF MOOD AND TONE

The setting of a spooky old mansion on a dark and stormy night playfully positions *Gone Home* within the horror genre. I say *playfully* because the tone is ever so slightly tongue in cheek, and the source of terror is ultimately more psychological than metaphysical. A great example of this is a bathtub that seems to be covered in blood but that turns out to be red hair dye. While playing, one student remarked: "I keep expecting Uncle Oscar's ghost to appear, or some psychopath to jump out at me with a knife," underscoring how *Gone Home* leverages a haunted house mood to create tension. I thought this was perfect fodder for a lesson on mood and tone.

In literature, much of the emotional climate is determined by the mood and tone of the narrative, two concepts that are commonly confused. To refresh your memory, "tone" is the narrator or speaker's attitude toward the subject, while "mood" is the atmosphere of the piece and the emotions it conjures in the reader. Mood and tone can be identified in most narrative forms, including film and video games. The distinction is between the emotional impact of what is being described (mood) versus how it is being described (tone). In books, this is entirely relayed through words, but in visual mediums such as video games, the graphic depiction also affects these two atmospheric elements. A funeral represented in a dark, severe, and realistic style would convey a different tone than if the funeral were conveyed in a playful, cartoony style.

I introduced the lesson by asking students to find definitions for mood and tone, and then we discussed the distinctions between them. I then directed them to a website with extensive lists of tone words and mood words and tasked them to choose 10 words from each category that best fit the game. Each student then sent his or her list to two volunteers—one received all the mood words, the second all the tone words, with which they compiled two master lists. Finally, the master lists were dumped into Wordle, a free online service that generates colorful word clouds (see Figure 6). The size of the words in the cloud are determined by their frequency in the list, so the larger words visually represent those most used by the class.

Figure 6. Tone word cloud.

The clouds were a great way to visually reinforce the differences between the two concepts. The exercise also allowed the students to reflect on their collective perception of the game's mood and tone. I posted each class's final products to our online learning-management system and concluded the activity by having them write paragraphs on the mood and tone of *Gone Home*.

AN EMBODIED VISION QUEST: SUMMONING AUTOSTEREOGRAMS

What's an autostereogram, you ask? If you remember the '90s you may recall a fad in which people purposefully stared at prints and posters that looked like kaleidoscopic white noise. Some had the almost magical ability to look at these images in a certain way and discover a 3D picture hidden within the chaos of colorful pixels. Staying faithful to its '90s setting, *Gone Home* features two autostereograms on Sam's bedroom wall (see Figure 7).

Many of my students wondered what these were and, eventually, a few became somewhat obsessed with seeing the secret image in these carryovers of '90s kitsch. It wasn't unusual to catch them in full vision-quest mode, staring wide-eyed through (as opposed to at) their laptop screens, murmuring, "I can see it. It's a shark—it's definitely a shark." If you want to give it a shot, check out the Magic Eye website and hope that you'll have better luck than I did, as I've never been able to see one. I epic fail as a man-child of the '90s!

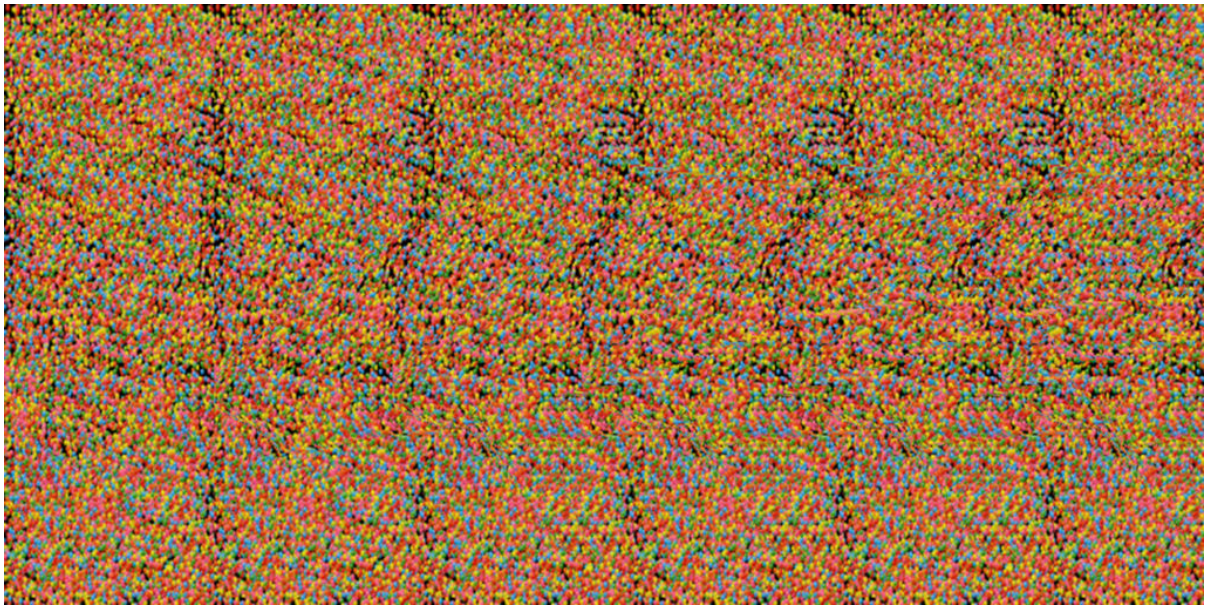

Figure 7. Can you see the hidden image? (This autostereogram appears as an example in Wikipedia.)

The game had become a sort of cultural time capsule. It didn't merely prompt my students to experience the '90s from the outside, but it allowed them to partake in and relive genuine '90s experiences. Similarly, by virtue of the game's audio and the playable music cassette strewn around the mansion, they could listen to Bratmobile and other Riot Grrrl bands that Sam was into. In a book, these artifacts would be abstracted by words, but in a game they became tangible embodied experiences. Students can gaze into the autostereograms (with mixed success) and hear the music, as opposed to only read about it. I argue that this gives them greater proximity to the narrative, as it is less mitigated. I would be the last person to diminish the value of reading or literature, but I only point out some unique features and perhaps advantages of a video game as a text. It's only fitting that *Gone Home*'s haunted house atmosphere successfully summons these palpable spirits of the past.

THE PROS AND CONS OF THE REVIEW REVOLUTION

Terry, the Greenbriar dad, writes pulpy sci-fi thrillers whose hero travels back in time to alter American history. Judging by the boxes of overstock scattered all over the house, his novels don't sell too well. Terry is forced to make ends meet by writing consumer electronic reviews for a home-entertainment magazine (see Figure 8). When he is publishing his home electronics critiques in *Gone Home*'s 1995 setting, reviews, whether for film, music, books, or other consumer goods were still largely a professional undertaking. Publishers and broadcasters governed access to the masses, and only a select circle of professional critics and reviewers could reach a wider audience.

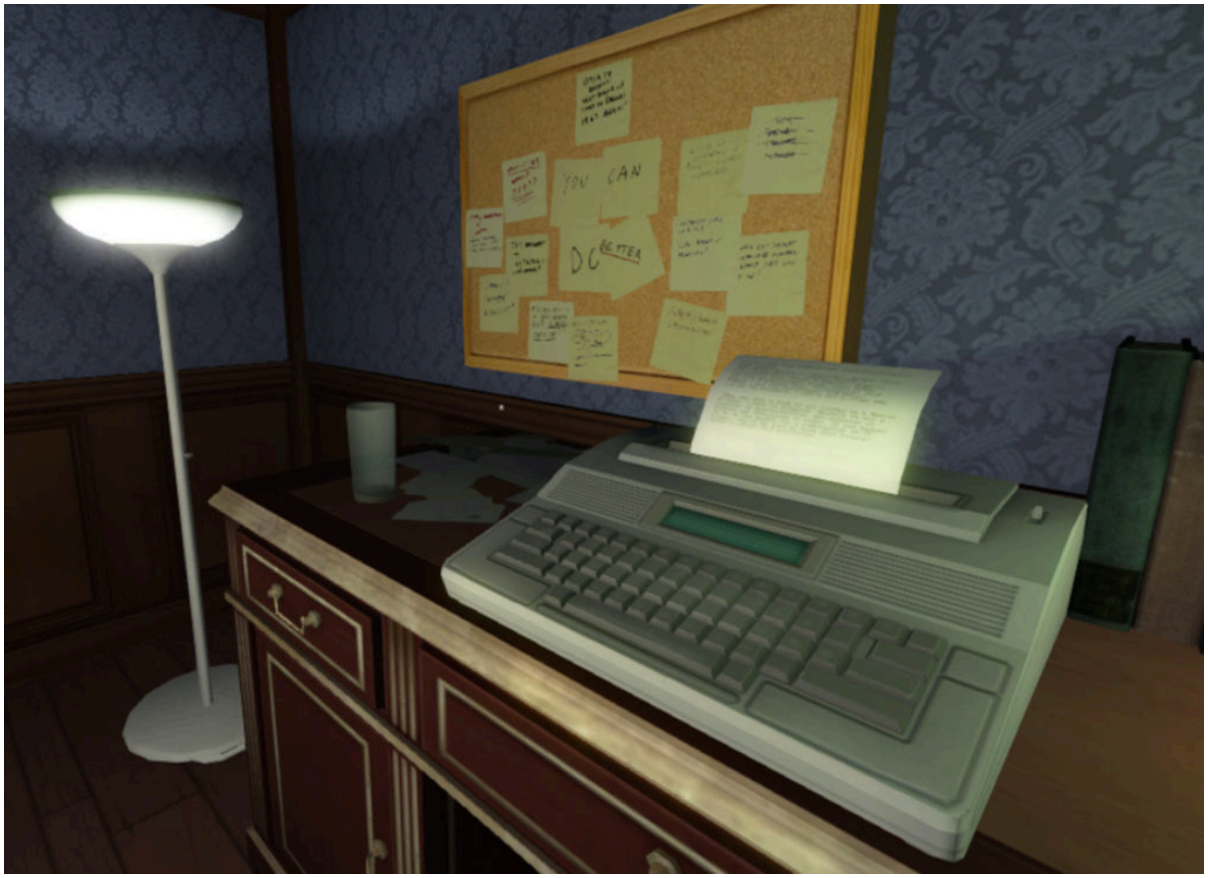

Figure 8. A review in progress at Terry's desk.

It wasn't too long after the mid-'90s that the advent of the Interweb threw open the floodgates. Today, for better or for worse, amateurs from all walks of life have wide-open forums in which to sing praises or vent dissatisfactions. This immense chorus of critical voices is highly democratic, but the sheer volume and lack of quality control clearly presents some downsides. For one, there is little accountability, as many reviews are anonymous. Consumers are often forced to sift through deeply divided and often conflicting opinions. There is also the issue of credibility. Could the review be a fake planted by the producers of the product or service? "Astroturf," as these promotional reviews are sometimes called, is big business in today's competitive online marketplace. In the end, the coexistence of both professional and amateur critics offers a broader range of perspectives from which savvy consumers can decide whether to add to the cart or take a pass.

Why not get my students to join the conversation and write a review of the game? It would tell me how they felt about the experience, they would think critically about their play, experiment with a prevalent and contemporary form of writing, and channel a little Terry Greenbriar along the way.

FANTASY CLASSROOMS AND REAL-WORLD REVIEWS

An ongoing problem with schools is that they largely operate within a bubble that is separate and distinct from productive society. Schools aim to prepare students for a workforce in which they don't actively participate until school is over. This is made clear whenever teachers refer to the menacing universe outside the school as "the real world," which makes the classroom a "fantasy world" by default. I remember that when I was in school, a few of my teachers would brandish "wait 'til you get

to the real world …" as a sort of threat, as if I would find myself instantly unemployed for failing some test or exam. I never stopped to think that there aren't many tests or exams in the real world; they exist only in the fantasy world we call "school."

The real world should not be a threat, but an invitation. I am convinced that many unmotivated students would love to have more of the real world in school, and more school in the real world. Much of school life is suspended in a zone of ineffectual inconsequence, and many students feel that acutely. They bide their time for 18 years and longer before they can make "real" contributions to society. In the worst cases, math problems are abstracted from practical application, language classes are taught in isolation from their genuine use, and English assignments are marked, returned, and ceremoniously deposited in a three-ring sarcophagus to be interred in some closet or crawl space. Schoolwork travels a tight circuit between student and teacher only to meet its end in storage, landfill, or burned in a ceremonious end-of-year bonfire. Occasionally, a gold-star effort might make it to the fridge door.

In preindustrial village or tribal life, youth and adolescents assumed a variety of duties that contributed directly and meaningfully to the good of the community. Life was intergenerational, not segregated by birthdays and ages. Young people helped gather and prepare food, carry water, look after and mentor the young, or conduct graduated menial work as part of an apprenticeship. They also spent much time in free and healthy play, an important part of meaningful social preparation and participation. They very much took part in the real world and their actions directly affected the livelihood of their community. This, of course, took a dark turn with the advent of industrialism, in which the mechanical regiments of clocks and factories transformed meaningful youthful contributions into the nightmare of child labor. Schools today retain many elements of the factory, but the student workers are their own products, conjuring the image of a hamster on a wheel. Ideally, schools would do a better job of safely and meaningfully harnessing the vast potential of their students for the productive betterment of their communities. We should strive toward an integrated lifelong program that fuses learning, work, and play. So how does this all relate to writing reviews for *Gone Home*?

In recent years, I've tried to think of ways to give my student work some real-world traction. The Internet has been helpful in taking baby steps toward this goal. As I mentioned earlier, product and service reviews are everywhere today. They are a valid and important contemporary form, as they play an important role in our consumer society. Writing reviews promotes critical thinking, synthesis, the logical organization of ideas, and even requires a specific form of literacy. We don't have to think critically just about a subject when we write a review, but we also have to think critically about the reviews that we read. Consequently, I thought that having my students produce reviews about *Gone Home* was a timely and practical response to playing a video game. Best of all, there are endless real-world online forums and game sites to post these reviews. They could genuinely contribute and participate in the knowledge community that the game has generated. Their work would not be graded only by their teacher but, more important, their efforts would be subjected to the scrutiny of the legion of invisible eyes that inhabit the "real world" of the Internet.

As long as security measures are taken, students today can be both critical consumers and active producers, partaking in online discussions, writing reviews, posting their pictures to Flickr, their videos to YouTube or Vimeo, and their music to SoundCloud. Their work no longer has to languish in

sterile obscurity but can now contribute meaningfully to dynamic communities and receive genuine feedback. This definitely bursts out of the school safety bubble, and it can lead to some painful interactions, especially in the emotionally charged environment of online gaming forums. There are always risks associated with exposing ourselves, but isn't this the world we are moving into? How many of my students have been bullied on Facebook or made ill-advised posts they can never take back? Posting work online can be an important lesson in digital citizenship. I'd rather they experience the trials and rewards of online communication by way of an impersonal game review than by unwisely posting something much more personal and damaging. Fantasy worlds are places without consequence, both in the negative and positive implications of the word. If and when schools decide that they want to better integrate students to the "real world," there will undoubtedly be consequences to be paid for the great prize of being consequential.

In preparation for this assignment, I had them read and take notes on a variety of reviews about *Gone Home* from a wide range of publications. I also provided them with a loose outline on how to structure their work and gave them a little more than a week to complete it, as they were also working on their topic-tracking presentations. Their completed reviews had to be posted to both their English blogs and on online game sites such as Metacritic, IGN, GameSpot, Giant Bomb, and so forth. They also had to include a screen shot of their online post on their blog as proof that their work had been dispatched to the real world (see Figure 9).

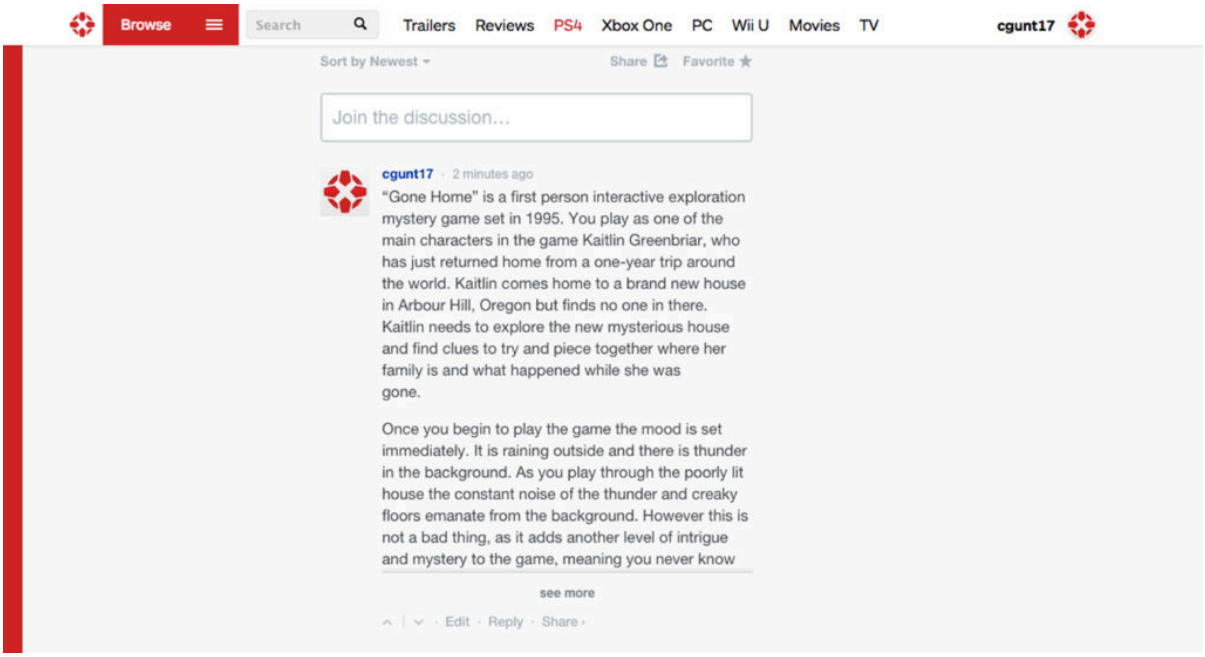

Figure 9. A review of Gone Home posted by a student to an online forum.

FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Students were given two classes to complete their reviews and work on the final presentations. Their presentation teams were made up of two to four members who had tracked the same topics. The groups were tasked to prepare 15-minute presentations that surveyed their findings and responded to the key question I assigned for each topic.

Group presentations were an ideal way to conclude the unit for a variety of reasons. The format encouraged genuine collaboration, in which each student brought something to the table and was made directly accountable to his or her classmates. Teams had to sift through their collective findings to determine what was important, organize speaking order and topic, and design a cohesive and attractive slide show. It was an exercise in group coordination, critical thinking, design, and creativity. It also furnished an opportunity to practice public speaking and visual literacy, two skills whose usefulness transcends many professions and undertakings. Finally, the presentations would expose the entire class to a variety of perspectives on the game, the narrative, the setting, and the characters.

Epic Slideshow Guidelines

I've seen many professional and student slide-show presentations through the years, and I have witnessed everything from gouge-my-eyes-out appalling to edge-of-my-seat spectacular. An effective slide show can be inspirational, motivational, informative, and entertaining, and these positive outcomes can be achieved by following a few simple rules that I share with my students:

- Know your topic.
- Rehearse your entire presentation at least twice, if not more.
- Avoid reading from the slide.
- Favor images over text—avoid excessive bullet points and text when possible.
- Keep it clean—avoid busy slides with too many images, animations, colors, and so on.

In the hands of a capable designer/presenter, some of these rules might be broken while still achieving positive results. However, following these simple rules can certainly lead to epic results.

Show and Tell

During the presentations, I sat at the back of the class and took copious notes from which I would complete rubrics and provide ample feedback to each group. I budgeted 5–10 minutes between presentations for my classes to ask questions and provide feedback, most of which ended up being thoughtful and constructive. As mentioned above, the topics included a study of thematically linked major and minor characters, artifacts and items endemic to 1995, the Riot Grrrl music movement, and video game references.

Character Clusters

Key Question: *How has the major character changed during the course of the story? Is s/he better off at the end of the game than at the beginning? Why or why not?*

Those who tracked characters explored relationships, motives, and personality traits to flesh out the individual story arcs. They discussed complex issues such as alcoholism, sexual abuse, infidelity, sexual identify, rejection, and loneliness, to name a few. They also addressed how the characters dealt with their particular crosses. Interestingly enough, groups presenting on the same topic had varied and sometimes even contradictory perspectives. One group, for example, was understanding of Janice for flirting with infidelity because her husband was emotionally unavailable, while another group was completely unforgiving and thought she was a terrible person who betrayed her husband and family.

In every case, they supported their ideas and character analysis with hard visual evidence from the story (see Figure 10).

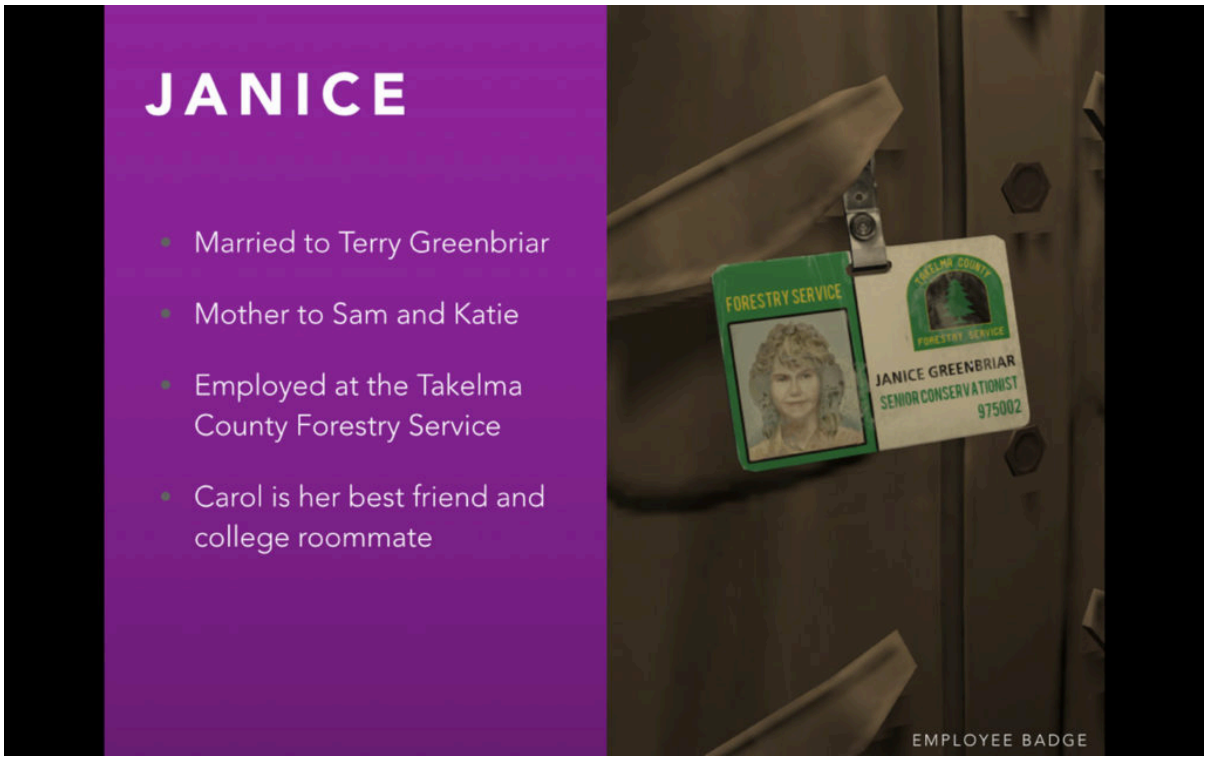

Figure 10. A character cluster slide on Janice, the Greenbriar mom.

Their slides included images of diary entries, letters, day planners, clothing, and documents that corresponded with what they were discussing. Their analysis was as rich and nuanced as it would be for a literary work. They not only demonstrated critical thinking and insight about the characters, but this exercise also let them think about how the challenges affecting the Greenbriar family connected to their own lives.

1995 Archaeology

Key Question: *How did the historical setting of 1995 affect the game? How would the game have changed if it were to take place today?*

Much like an archaeologist, a player in *Gone Home* rebuilds the life of the family by piecing together the fragments and artifacts of its members' lives. The game is set in 1995 and, for those of us who grew up in the '90s, VHS and cassette tapes, electric typewriters, *TV Guides,* telephone books, and Magic Eye posters are the stuff of nostalgia (see Figure 11). But for my students, these may as well be bone fragments and pottery shards from a lost civilization. Those who presented on this topic chose items and practices that were characteristic of the period and designed their slide shows to resemble museum exhibits. They researched each artifact, provided background information, and discussed, where applicable, how the items affected the story or the game. It ultimately amounted to a deep consideration of the literary concept of setting.

Figure 11. A VHS tape from a 1995 Archaeology presentation.

Riot Grrrl

Key Question: *How did this style of music work well with both the geographic and historical context of the game? Why is Riot Grrrl a genuine expression of Sam's journey?*

The music and culture from this Northwest '90s feminist punk movement pervades many parts of the story. The thrashing guitars and in-your-face vocals are the soundtrack to Sam's journey of self-discovery. Groups who chose this topic explored the movement through the bootleg cassettes, zines, music magazines, and posters spread throughout the house (see Figure 12). They included music video and audio samples in their presentations, and a few enthusiastically shared anecdotes they'd encountered while gathering background info on the Riot Grrrl scene. Music enthusiasts were able to discover a musical subgenre but, more important, it also occasioned them to reflect on the connection between music culture, adolescent identity building and self-expression.

Figure 12. A slide from a Riot Grrrl presentation.

Video Game Reference

Key Question: *Why do cultural texts such as films, books, and video games include references to other relevant cultural works? In what video game tradition does* Gone Home *participate? What is* Gone Home*'s video game genre?*

Gone Home is replete with subtle references to the video games that influenced its own creation. Because the references are hidden and easy to miss, the presentations on this topic were by far the most eye-opening. Students who had played the game and not noticed a single one were surprised to discover that there were dozens of nods to video game culture in everything from motorcycle adsto varsity jacket embroideries. The slide shows were rich with images and many included screen shots and videos from the games that were being referenced, such as *BioShock* and *Deus Ex*. The video game reference presentations opened a window to how the literary concept of intertextuality is manifest in the game world. Furthermore, it contributes toward the validation of the game as a complex and nuanced text that does not easily give up all its secrets.

THE RESULT

In the end, they were easily some of the best student presentations I've experienced to date. Why? They responded well to the guidelines I provided to produce effective slide shows. Also, most of the students were allowed to choose their topics, which leveraged genuine interest and encouraged ownership. It also helps that *Gone Home* is a predominantly visual experience and translates well to the visual nature of a slide-show presentation. Contentwise, students connected with the topics on a personal level as they demonstrated keen insights into family psychology, adolescent angst, teen-parent power dynamics, and how historical circumstances can shape and affect the stories of our lives.

They were articulate, generally well prepared, and often enthusiastic. Although I hadn't required it, many wrote scripts that they used to cue them during their talks. Some even discussed mood and tone, demonstrating that they had successfully absorbed the concept from an earlier lesson.

Were all the presentations successful? Of course not—no matter how much we may strive for uniformity, which is probably misguided anyway, teaching and learning are messy affairs. Two presentations were subpar and, in a few cases, some group members were not as prepared as others. Another detrimental factor was that the Greenbriar mansion is dimly lit, so some of the screen shots on the slides suffered from being on the dark side.

The slide-show presentations enlisted the entire class to openly contemplate and participate in a visually rich, analytical retrospective of the entire gameplay and narrative experience. It was a revelation of the game's secrets and nuances, eliciting thoughtful insights and discussions. Students honed a broad spectrum of skills, reinforced knowledge on character and narrative, and, dare I say, even seemed to enjoy themselves along the way.

HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH APOCALYPSE

Is this then the apocalypse of the traditional English class? Will Holden Caulfield and Atticus Finch be replaced by Mario and Zelda, all at the expense of the written word? I hate to say it, but the four horsemen showed up a long time ago. Those of you who teach English, search your dark and complicated souls and ask yourselves: How many of your students really finish the novel? Even worse, how many boys finish the novel? My experience dictates that, in many cases, I may as well be teaching directly from SparkNotes, eNotes, Shmoop, and BookRags (those four horsemen I was talking about), because that is where many adolescents turn in lieu of the original works.

English class can become a sort of theater where everybody pretends the texts are being read. The sheer abundance of communications alternatives is making it harder and harder to focus on reading as we once did. The quickly changing ecology of modern communication expands the notion of literacy to include nonalphabetical visual elements, interactive texts, and a renewed emphasis on orality (Skype, YouTube, Siri, anybody?). Our duty as educators is to design our courses to prepare students to think critically and succeed in their current communication context, as that is the environment where they must survive and, we hope, prosper.

High school English class should continue to be the temple of the written word, but the goal should expand to effective and meaningful modes of communication. All media have the written word at their foundation and it should be given priority, but a space might be made for other meaningful forms of communication. Video games are a new medium and have a long way to go before they can compete with the depth and nuances of literature. A game such as *Gone Home* has a foot in both worlds as it reinforces a range of skills traditionally associated with high school English, but it also opens the door to skills that are forward thinking and relevant to our rapidly changing age. *Gone Home* undoubtedly lacks the richness of a literary text, but it compensates in other areas.

One of my hardest-working students and a nongamer told me he found it easier to remember names and facts by accessing them through the game than he did when he read them in a novel or short story. He was initially suspicious of using a video game for English, but his accessing the narrative in an audiovisual and embodied medium better suited how his brain retained information. This is

significant, as it plays into the ideas of differentiated instruction and multimodalities. Different brains learn in different ways and, to his surprise, this style seemed to work for him.

Most of my students reported enjoying studying *Gone Home*, but not all. A few didn't like the story, others didn't like the game, and some were indifferent, but at least I knew that these critical perspectives were all based on actually having worked through the narrative and not gleaned from an online summary or study guide. They delved into the text, drew their own critical conclusions about it, and responded in kind. Despite the unusual choice of text, or site for analysis, their learning outcomes were consistent with the skills demanded by lit class curricula from around the world, including Common Core State Standards.

I use the term *apocalypse* not only for dramatic effect but also conscious of its original meaning in Greek as a revelation of something hidden or a disclosure of knowledge, not as an end or cataclysmic finality. By unearthing the hidden possibilities and rending the veil we refresh our teaching to align with the world as it is, not as we want it to be. This allows us to open up the possibility for a meaningful renewal of our practice, which is the greatest way to serve and prepare our students. McLuhan famously quipped that "we look at the present in a rear view mirror"—a good reminder that maybe it's time to turn our attention to the road ahead.