Gone Home:
The Interactive/Poetics of Play

The lights were out in the room. It was long past two o'clock in the morning, in January. It was northern Indiana, where the snow banks all the way up the windows in winter. Everything was in its place, including me, at my midnight station: crouched at the soft edge of the couch, with a controller buzzing in my hands. This was my chosen solitude, the lone activity I'd decided to fill the week's empty time with. A longing lingers dreadfully in the air, a feeling I'd meant to expel by exhaling its vapor. Trying to find some distance. I needed so many things. It is embarrassing to admit it now, but I found so much to be necessary at that time. So in the quiet space of a few cleared moments each day, I retracted from everything and sank into myself, I consumed narratives to work at filtering a paltry knowledge out from the silt of the remainder of those days. I used to bury myself in the pages of a book, or scour the images of a film, but that night, with the wind crackling under the snow, I was playing a videogame.

It'd begun to *mean* for me, it'd begun to accrue the tenor of a diversion with meaning. I won't lie and say, as I carry on into pretension-filled terrain from here, that there was no sidestepping pleasure in playing videogames. I often played at night, after the sun was down and the day was done, to relax, to kill stress. But the more I played, the more I began to see games as a ground for experimental storytelling, a form that was just beginning to be tapped for its massive potential to shake a fiction into someone's bones. That's what certain games can do, I realized, what other fictional forms could no longer do: *infiltrate* us with story, *poison* us with experience.

After all, we both read *and* experience a videogame. We encounter with the same breath that we use to create.

On that particular night, with the snow at the windows and a cold moon howling far away behind the clouds, after just three or four solitary hours, I played through what I still find to be the most believable love story I've ever been told. The game was called *Gone Home*, just released for console after its two years of magnanimous critical success on PC.

I have a strong desire to trace this feeling, this game's overwhelming ability to affect me emotionally and intellectually, as both *player* (put another way, something like *reader/viewer*) and *co-author* of this love story. I want to carve literary space for the poetry up to now left untilled and obscure at the heart of this game.

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There is a new art form, blooming out of the commercial lean of the videogame industry. There has been a crop of new games that have featured a collective circling around a few particular gameplay and storytelling mechanics: the first-person perspective, a markedly literary and omnipresent spoken narration, an archaeological sense of narrative, and extreme, unabashed affect. Many critics and writers have called these games "interactive fictions." As with all new art forms, it's not actually all that new. It is easy enough to follow the line of this type of gamic storytelling back to first-person 3D adventure games from the '90s, or back to the most primitive text-based computer games of yore. But here and now we have a serious focus on storytelling as

well as the physical and physiological experience of playing the game. In certain other words, we have finally a slew of videogames (*Dear Esther*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *SOMA*, *The Stanley Parable*, etc.) that should please both the ludological game theorists who insist on gameplay *as* narrative and the more literary-leaning expounders of embedded game narrative.

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In *Gone Home*, you play as Katie, a barely-characterized protagonist who has "returned" to the United States from a backpacking tour of Europe. You approach your family's new home, which was inherited from an uncle and inside of which you have never been. There is no one there. You begin searching for clues as to your parents' and sister Sam's absence, and a story builds out of Sam's voice-overed diary entries that you can activate by pressing a button near certain items in the house. You are also asked by the nature of the game to assemble additional narratives through the exploration of the house and its items, its scrawled notes and its hidden spaces.

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At first I wanted to use the term thrown around by critics, *interactive fiction*, to describe *Gone Home*. But the caveat of the fiction-creation itself not being interactive (i.e., even if you are in control of how much narrative you are able to find during the course of the game, you don't make new narrative bits: that's all up to the game's creators, The Fullbright Company, and already loaded into the game in set, particular places before you ever boot it up) proved that this term would not do.

The Fullbright Company itself calls *Gone Home*'s genre "immersive story exploration video games." Explanatory, perhaps, but not elisive enough for my purposes.

So I've settled on "playable fiction." To suggest that in this type of fiction we are not only reading, though we certainly still are, in our way.

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People have made the case for videogames of all sorts as possible forms for fiction. Barry Atkins wrote a book called *More Than a Game* about the videogame itself as fictional form, concerned with readings of both cinematic plot and pixel/polygon play as inducers of narrative. Henry Jenkins was an early help in giving us terms to understand the different types of narrative within games, the ludic (i.e., gameplay is king and all) and the narratological (i.e., the implanted story is all that matters). As James Paul Gee elucidates, in line with Jenkins, the playing of the game itself crafts a weld and weave of narrativistic impressions that accumulate to the experience of the game. Patrick Jagoda and Ian Bogost have each expounded upon the procedural narrative of Jonathan Blow's *Braid*, which delivers its effect and affect through a subversion and inversion of old-school platforming videogame mechanisms.

So my work here is not exactly new. It stands with good company, others trying to think more and further about these errant diversions.

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An example of how the story "works" in *Gone Home*:

In *Gone Home*, it is revealed to the player that Katie and Sam's father Terry was abused in some way by the uncle whose house the family has inherited. The way the game reveals this to the player is in the exploration of a small room off to the side in the basement, where the light cannot be turned on. If they are savvy enough, the player can find a small rocking horse tossed into the shadowed corner. Considering this room's proximity to a safe owned by the benefactor uncle, and Terry's childhood height chart crayoned into a nearby wall which suspiciously stops at a particular young age that corresponds to the historical moment of an "indiscretion" mentioned in a secret note found *in* the uncle's safe, we are perhaps able to assume this symbol's portent. I certainly didn't find these connections on my first play, but it is all there.

In Terry's office, there is a filing cabinet where Terry has hidden his uncle's will, which gives Terry the house, presumably in some awful, sad, failed attempt on the uncle's part to make up for his transgression and abuse. Terry, unable to afford anything anymore (which we find out through other various notes), was compelled to move his family into the house. The lock code for the filing cabinet is written on a file folder the player can find which also happens to contain an angry letter from Terry's reviews editor at the home theater magazine he critiques for. The letter points out Terry's failures in reviewing, "such a simple thing" as he calls it, and speaks to Terry's issue of allowing personal writing and confessions to bleed into his stereo reviews. Here

we see layers of Terry's lifelong difficulty, it shows up elsewhere and in some ways all throughout the house once we can put together the auguries.

What I can do, what any player could do, is grab the rocking horse, the children's toy, the symbol. It isn't blood-drenched. It isn't cursed. It is pristine, glaring. I can bring it out into the light, out from the unspeaking darkness, and place it there in visibility. A small gesture, but to me, and to some others, perhaps, a powerful one.

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The story unfolds through voice-over and actual gameplay, which does, in all fairness, resort to various textual media in importing that story from the tv to the player, but in this game we're not sitting back and watching a movie playback before our eyes without involvement. We're not "rewarded" with a film-like cinematic scene after "beating" some part of the game. In *Gone Home*, we are constantly making the story; its idiosyncrasies are created by us. This *is* like reading, watching art films, viewing a painting, but here we're *physically* making it at the same time that we experience it.

You *are* reading all the time. Actual text, symbols physical and imagistic and metaphoric, reading-by-listening to voice-over, et cetera. You even find Sam's written scraps of earlier versions of her finished (and spoken) diary entries at the very end of the game, which makes for an effect like looking at galleys of *The Wasteland*, or Kerouac's long scroll.

Many literary (and not-so-literary) genres are conjured within the game via written notes and stories and poetic etchings of Sam's that we find (she is a writer, as is her father, and her grandfather is revealed to be a literature scholar), as well as a number of found books and paintings/posters. There's the romance novel that the mother is hiding in a box, which resonates with her flirtations with the new guy at work. There are the spy/sci-fi/conspiracy novels written Terry, dealing with alternate, sci-fi realities surrounding the JFK assassination, an historical event that we eventually find out matches up with the year and time when his trauma was experienced. We find a copy of *Leaves of Grass* under the mother's side of the bed, and we are reminded, via the book's back cover, that "seeing, hearing, feeling, and each part and tag of me is a miracle."

And of course the cassette tapes, which feature real songs by real riot grrrl bands from the early '90s. There's a copy of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which many fans have pointed out shares narrative elements with *Gone Home*'s found story, and on that same shelf there's the I Ching. As in that text, in *Gone Home* you seek its answers in variety, in variousness.

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The game ends when you want it to. I wonder if this is as unique as I'm making it sound, here (after all, you can mess around in game worlds forever without ever finishing or even advancing the narrative, in many types of games. This explains how so many people you might ask today will say they played the earlier 3D *Grand Theft Auto* games for hundreds of hours without ever

doing any of the “missions,” how they couldn’t recall the game’s narrative though they never played another game for as long).

There are a finite number of narrative objects to discover, but even that statement is elusive. When you come to the end of the diary monologues, when the voice-over ends, the credits roll, and a *Heavens to Betsy* song plays broodingly over them.

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But the story is so much more elegant and subtle and nuanced than it’s thus far been given credit for by the critics. Outside of the diary audio logs, there’s a great deal of literariness. I wonder if the developers understood this, considering that they added an option to disable them in the console versions released two years after the PC original. But even if so, I feel like the logs themselves, in their particular contexts, have weight, and a real grandeur. It’s about picking up the object that initiates them, which contains layers of meaning to be added and put over top and through the monologues themselves.

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The game’s designers insisted on including instances of “pointless interactivity”, which are characterized as the finding of objects that can be picked up and manipulated but do not related any discernible narrative. They said it’s about making an “internally consistent” world, a realism.

“It’s your job to decide what’s significant, what has importance, and it’s not for us to decide and tell that to you,” states The Fullbright Company.

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The narrative is archaeological. You dig up its bones and use whatever’s in your head at the time to make sense of them. The taxonomies you give them are from your own book. For me it was the belly-cut of love and a historical fear related to that and a longstanding devotion to loneliness.

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Maybe for this genre (playable fiction) it’s got to do with being part creator and receiver, in a more pronounced way than in other forms. In no other medium is the participant as much the maker: not even other attempts at this sort of participatory, interactive art that you might come across in a gallery, where really the thing being played out is mostly a power game between the artist and their unsuspecting, unsophisticated, un-artistic public. There is infinitely less pretension in a videogame artwork. In a videogame, the creators are actually concerned about how you can participate in the making of the experience.

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This fiction possesses an incredible presence. It does just that – it possesses the player, the experiencer. It fills the room you're in. Having the lights out helps this experience embody itself around you.

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I feel so strange and alien and yet at home playing *Gone Home*. It is not a feeling I could ever accurately describe, and I won't waste a terrible amount of time doing it. After all, you'll play it or you won't. That's the difference between me and a critic of literature, of film, of theater: the stakes are low enough as to not even be there. The chances of you playing this game are very low. But, honestly and by all means, continue to spectate.

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Play this fiction alone, at night, without any sound but the compositions underneath the screen and Sam's winding confession, and you'll never leave it. It'll never leave you.

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The sunset light
in this house is
the saddest thing
I've ever seen.

I just want to

sleep.

When I'm in the

attic it almost

feels like

Lonnie could still

be here.

She's just downstairs.

I'm just waiting

to hear her

pull down the hatch

and

come running up.

Maybe I'll go

up to

the attic

and

wait.

-- Sam, character from *Gone Home*

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The level of personal interest and involvement in the characters' trajectories and the unspooling of the narratives at work is maximum, quicker and, in my feeling, *fuller* wrought than with other

media, other art forms, because of the first-person perspective. You don't see Katie's hands. You don't hear Katie's voice, except on the home's answering machine. In this case, you can really embody her experience of investigating the home, but you are not quite *her*.

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There's no editing in this videogames. *Gone Home* doesn't peddle cutscenes to its players. The playing of *Gone Home* is in real-time, at your pace.

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In his book *More Than a Game*, calling for a "rigorous examination" of videogames as a fictional form, something more than the confused "misreadings" the general public and pundits and politicians have thus far utilized in zeroing in on this media, Barry Atkins figures "it would not take too much of a leap of the imagination to see the computer game develop into something like a new form of soap opera or action movie." He continues, wondering about videogames' perhaps obscure literary potential: "One day, perhaps, the computer game will even produce its *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or its *Ulysses*, its *Casablanca* or its *Citizen Kane*" (24).

Ian Bogost, in *How to Talk about Videogames*: calls the characters "too archetypal to be truly literary" (176), says the story "rings hollow" for its "paint-by-number" straightforwardness, claims that the game is the poster child for the videogame in general as a "perpetually adolescent" form (177). He likens *Gone Home*'s narrative content to young adult fiction, the

gamic equivalent of a teenaged tale told with the intellectual complexity of the aforementioned maturity level.

So what happens when a game designer or group of them writes a *Nightwood,* an *Anna Karenina,* a *Beloved*? Will it ever happen? Does it even matter? And to whom does it matter? Why can't this story, fully felt, stand strongly enough?

Gone Home gives something of an answer to these questions in the game itself. Terry enjoys some renewed success within the genre writing world, having his old spy novels picked up and reprinted by an indie genre press called "Unknown Dimensions" even in the wake of his father's refusal (he was a lit critic, writer of an in-game book sardonically titled *Joyce: A* Complete *Understanding* [emphasis mine]) to recognize his work as worthwhile or artistic.

After all, as Terry's father says in a found note to him, "An author's work is the externalization of that which he holds dear (and that which he fears), and in this respect I believe your work was successful. But the lens through which the personal shone was needlessly clouded by genre clichés and implausible dimestore science-fictional dei ex machina. The great authors speak of their life's milieu in clear and honest tones, the lens crystal that refracts their thoughts without distortion…I urge you to shed artifice. You can do better."

You can do better is plastered over Terry's noteboard in his office upstairs, a phrase that has clearly haunted him over the years.

Gone Home gives something of an answer to some of my earlier questions in the game itself. Terry enjoys some renewed success within the genre writing world, having his old spy novels picked up and reprinted by an indie genre press called “Unknown Dimensions” even in the wake of his father’s refusal (he was a lit critic, writer of an in-game book sardonically titled *Joyce: A* Complete *Understanding* [emphasis mine]) to recognize his work as worthwhile or artistic.

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I know how much I need this game. Is that something to be ashamed of? In this country, yes. In most countries. But impropriety doesn’t diminish how much I starve, how much my face contorts. The love of my life is shut in a hospital and I can’t be there. I have only a silent home and the noise I choose to fill it with. If it’s sentimentality I want, then why should I apologize?

I won’t. Apologize. I don’t want the unreal, over-wrought complications of a literary life, not anymore. Life is both less and more complicated than that. And I don’t want the reel-spun fantasy, two hour edit. I want to feel, I want to be there. I want a subjective literature, a literature that allows me to remember my own life, a literature that builds on those memories, alters them, transmutes the past. Bring me back there, Sam, bring me back home, to your home and mine.