

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Gone Home

**Platform:** PlayStation 4, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, PC, IOS

**Genre:** Interactive Storytelling

**Release Date:** August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013

**Developer:** The Fullbright Company

**Publisher:** The Fullbright Company

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Steve Gaynor

## Overview

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Returning to a vacant home, Kaitlyn Greenbriar, knows not the cause of her family's absence or of the events that have transpired throughout the time of her travels in Europe. A note taped to the front door informs her that Sam, her younger sister, has left for a reason that she hopes to keep from the rest of the world and doesn't state why or where she's gone. By rummaging through the new home to uncover notes, postcards, old files, and cassette tapes, Katie, the playable character, can build a timeline of this past year's events and formulate a reason for her sister's disappearance. It soon becomes clear that the game's narration strongly pursues Sam's struggles with school, love, and fitting in with societal norms. Without any direction, Kaitlyn must discover that things aren't the same as she left them, but also understand the reason for Sam's sudden decision to leave.

In order to do this, *Gone Home*, employs an interactive gameplay style where the player can physically pick up, read and store household objects that may or may not pertain to uncovering the mystery. Deciding where each piece falls is part of the journey, but every article encountered assists in the storytelling of each situation. With the mysterious story being the main drive force of gameplay, the game places a heavy emphasis on its development and the small descriptive features that make the emotional journey worthwhile.

## Characters

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- **Kaitlin "Katie" Greenbrair** – The player character. She is the eldest daughter of the Greenbriar family and serves as the player's eyes when uncovering the events that have transpired over the past few months while she was away travelling. She's a "poster" child who excels at everything from sports to academics to popularity, and can often be used as a comparison, being someone that "fits in", when analyzing her sister's successes and failures. She seems to be Sam's only

confidant in the family, allowing for the player to emotionally uncover the mystery of Sam's disappearance and feel a sense of empathy throughout the timeline.

- **Samantha “Sam” Greenbrair** – As an angsty teen searching for acceptance, she is the youngest daughter of the Greenbriar family and Katie's younger sister. Sam could not be father away from Katie's personality, continuously acting up in school, while not driven by any clear goals like her sister. Sam's sudden disappearance drives the interactive narration of *Gone Home* and fuels the main mystery of the story, “Why did she leave?”.
- **Yolanda “Lonnie” DeSoto** – Sam's best friend and current lover. She is outgoing and reckless and doesn't have the same paternal support that Sam has. She struggles with obeying structure and can only be seen following orders when in JROTC practice. She is in love with Sam, but also struggles with the idea about having to leave her behind to pursue her career in the army.
- **Terrence “Terry” Greenbrair** – Katie and Sam's father and Jan's husband. He is a stereo reviewer for a magazine with a previous moderately successful career as a novelist. His works were described as “too weird” and “ahead of their time”, and he is currently suffering from a writer's block not allowing him to produce proper reviews/novels. His failures cause a drift in his marriage, which he has recently started to mend with couple's therapy.
- **Janice “Jan” Greenbrair** – Katie and Sam's mother and Jan's wife. She works at the State Forestry Department and was previously a Canadian citizen. Although always supportive, she feels emotionally distant from her husband and is looking for something to fill that void. She has a friendly relationship with a jealous old roommate, Carol, in which she often discusses her attraction to a new individual at work, Rick. However, she later she notices her “connection” with Rick was all in her head, and agrees to go to marriage counselling to work on her current relationship with Terrence.
- **Oscar Masan** – Terry's uncle. He's the previous owner of the estate and the reason why it is called the “Psycho House.” He once owned a local pharmacy, which he, at some point, suddenly transferred leadership of. After passing away in the Arbor Hill home, his left over essence acts as the main driving force of fear throughout the gameplay.

## Breakdown

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*Gone Home*'s charm rests in the games proper use of environment and emergent storytelling, each which provide just the right amounts of mystery and suspense for players, but also drives the completion and comprehension of the game's story. Working with a relatively small setting, the Fullbright Company succeeds in capturing the emotional mess that is the Greenbrair household but also keeps players invested in each moment by allowing for interactions with almost any object in the house and instilling fear through background effects and the soundtrack. These features, combined with the amazing and compelling story that *Gone Home* tells, is what individualizes this Fullbright installment and drives its success.

There are two main plots outlined throughout the game, uncovering a *Mystery*, and *Coming of Age*. The whole driving force of the gameplay is based on mystery as the

player character is, first off, wondering why Sam chose to leave, but also where the rest of their family is. Like any mystery, the player must reveal clues and personal connections through the detection process, which in this game is portrayed by rummaging through house hold files, cabinets, and drawers, but also by paying close attention to the smaller details that surround them. Each room truly tells a story, and it is up to the player to locate and identify materials or information that may prove useful for completing the narrative. Unravelling fragmented clues one at a time slowly allows the user to begin forming a complete storyline. The game also allows for the user to chronologically order events and truly understand Sam's perspective through the presentation of spoken journal entries that begin to play as specific milestones are reached.

A *Coming of Age* plot is also prominent in this narrative. Although it doesn't directly intertwine with gameplay, Sam's "coming of age" story is what makes this gameplay experience memorable. The story begins with a semi-depressed Sam who is being bullied by her peers because of the simple fact that she lives in the "Psycho House." She's struggling making connections with people and forming friendships, but this all changes when Lonnie's character catches her attention. They soon begin to form a platonic relationship and you can see Sam's personality change for the better. She becomes more social and sounds truly happy when explaining her story to Katie throughout each journal entry. Sam even appears to begin accepting herself as an individual that simply does not fit into societal norms. As time goes on, Sam also begins to wonder if what she is feeling for Lonnie is simply just another great friendship or if there is something more, eventually concluding with the latter. This adds another aspect to Sam's character that simply does not "fit in," but the player can now perceive how Sam's relationship with Lonnie has given her strength and fitting in doesn't really seem to matter all that much anymore. Throughout the story, Sam is dealing with issues that only she can overcome, and although losing her innocence in the process, she had to learn how to become an adult and see the world as it is. Her decision to leave was ultimately an entanglement of all these various coming of age aspects being concluded as Sam realizes that she must create the life that will accept her.

*Gone Home* would simply not be the same if it weren't for the thought provoking side stories that the player encounters. The game encompasses many design elements and household visuals/objects; some of which are never clarified even when completing the game. One example of this is Oscar Masan and Terry's relationship. Throughout the story, you also learn about Oscar Masan, Terry's uncle, and you learn that he has left everything in his will to him, despite not having seen him since age 12. Many can reason that Masan simply did not have any other family, but context clues in the game's design suggest otherwise. Finally, making it to the basement, the player can find rather unusual visuals such as Terry's height measurements, that end when he reaches age 12 (1963), a child's toy, and a bed. But why would all those things be found in an old rundown basement? Before making connections, the player also previously discovered that 1963 is the year in which JFK's assassination took place, a tragedy that Terry seems to be fixated on changing when writing his novels. When uncovering the basement's secrets, the player eventually locates and reads Oscar's letter found in a safe there, where he apologizes for this "unforgivable act," and all these pieces begin to fall together. Although never clearly specified, these observations all seem to reference to the conclusion that Terry was molested or sexually abused by his uncle in that basement and

has yet to get over it. Because this story never outlined or made this information clear to the viewer, it exemplifies a brilliant use of emergent story telling that allows for the player to make their own conclusions on the matter and highlights the game as it leaves questions unanswered and room for further discussion. The player also feels a sense of satisfaction knowing that there is still more to be discovered on the Greenbrair family, but also makes sense of why Terry is the way he is. This moment highlights exactly what the game developers were aiming for, being that “not everything is as it seems,” but also lets the player take part in the narration.

Combining an amazing narrative with a compelling soundtrack really ties the game together. Although usually playing through the game with heavy rainfall in the background, *Gone Home* often allows the player to encounter music playing devices such as stereos, vinyl table tops, and cassette players. Here the player is given the option to play the music found in that specific room on one of these devices. This music can range from swing in the living room, to hard punk rock in Sam’s secret layer. Overall, encountering such instances creates a nice break for the player, but also works to create the ambience of these specific rooms. Trust me, one doesn’t understand how angsty Sam is until they physically hear the heavy metal punk that she praises. Small attentions to detail like these are really what drives *Gone Home* over top and sets it apart from most interactive storytelling games.

## **Strongest Element**

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From a game narrative standpoint, one could say that *Gone Home*’s strongest element is the fear and feeling of being unwelcome in the Greenbrair household that the story provides its players. Throughout the game, your character trembles in fear as you walk alone through an estate that, although, it is technically owned by your family, your player character, Katie, has never lived in and wouldn’t really consider a place she calls “home.” Not only is all of Katie’s stuff packed up and hidden away in closets or the basement, but early on you learn of the home’s past owner, Oscar Masan, who died in the very house, leaving it branded the “Psycho House.” With a missing family, and a home that was left as if there were people living in it just this morning, the player quickly begins to draw conclusions that something bad happened here and that the ghost of Oscar Masan could be the cause. The game design fully harnesses this factor of the story and works to subtly create an atmosphere of fear. The floor and walls are always creaking, thunder roars outside of the house, lights flicker, and TVs buzz from electrical issues. Simply put, you don’t know what to fear, but the thought of there being a ghost in the mansion is enough to make the player turn and leave every single light on when rummaging the house.

Overall, throughout the gameplay you sense unwelcomeness. Being something that Katie herself has probably never experienced before, it is an important feeling to have when understanding Sam’s perspective and emotionally relating to her story for both the player and Katie. Sam felt unwelcome at school and at home, basically everywhere she went. This sense of feeling unwelcome intensifies your interactions with Sam’s story and each diary narration you listen to because, although drawn from different sources, your emotions are the same. At first, the player feels like they’re trespassing in an unknown home, but as the game progresses, not only does one become familiar with the setting, but the player also realizes Masan’s ghost, if it is real, never harmed you and

actually was not worth being afraid of all along. This realization happens when completing the game near when the player learns of Sam's reason for leaving, her perusal of love and acceptance of herself. After the fear and unease experienced throughout the entire game, the player finally experiences relief or freedom with Sam, although both events are happening on completely different timelines. The proper utilization of these emergent factors and installment of fear is what allows the player to be properly invested in the story and still to this day remember each feeling felt when uncovering Sam's journey.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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*Gone Home* employs many great design aspects, making it difficult to pick a weak point. Overall, the most unsuccessful element of the story is the fact that a lot of side narratives were left underwhelming or didn't really tie into the drama happening with Sam all that much. Did Sam know of her parents' marital problems? Or of her mother's short-lived perusal of ranger Rick? *Gone Home* didn't heavily look at how each individual's problems or actions might directly affect Sam's story. Sam most likely knew of these issues, being that the reason her parents were away was to attend marriage counselling, but how come they did not affect her emotions or decisions? Any youth understanding that their parents are encountering the possibility of divorce would immediately become worried or distressed. The only real issue Sam encountered with her parents was when they considered her sexual orientation "a phase," but there are no suggestions in each parents' character development that may explain why this was their reaction to her news. How did her parents feel after Sam told them the news of her sexuality? Was the thought simply disregarded as Sam saw it? Simply put, the story could have done a better job of intertwining each family member's stories to Sam's journey, rather than simple providing descriptions that resemble or enhance each character separately.

## **Highlight**

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*Gone Home*'s narrative wouldn't be nearly as impacting if it weren't for the game's spectacular ending. After working their way through the house, the player finally finds a key to the attic, an entrance often seen, but never given the opportunity to enter. The room depicts Sam and Lonnie's last night together, and their painful departure that left Sam heartbroken. Although Lonnie's already left, a note reveals that the distressed voicemails initially played at the entrance of the house or beginning of the game are realized to be Lonnie's attempts to contact Sam in hopes of running away together where they can find "a place for us." Soon after the player finds the journal where Sam has been leaving all her messages to Katie. The player can finally hear stress leave Sam's voice as she apologetically tells Katie of her decision and how she wishes that she at least understands why she did what she did. Ending with "Love, Sam" the credits begin to roll as the player is still coming to terms with the powerful emotions and soul-stirring story they just experienced.

## Critical Reception

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1. **“Gone Home is a remarkable first-person adventure that tells one of the finest stories I've ever experienced in games.”**- When reviewed by Marty Silva at IGN, *Gone Home* received an overall score 9.5/10 as he was awed by the realistic feelings that the game design introduced that reminded him of his own home. Marty also praises the soundtracks moody, ambient score that juxtaposed rock cassettes often found throughout the house. His only drawback seems to be repetition of objects you sometimes encounter throughout the game, such as an overly present amount of empty tissue boxes in every room.
2. **“After completing the game, I sat in spellbound, smiling silence for nearly an hour, and that's perhaps the greatest praise I can lay upon a game.”**- At Polygon, Danielle Riendeau scored *Gone Home* a perfect 10/10. Stating that she never thought she could see herself within a game, Danielle praises how the story speaks to universal experiences, such as fear of alienation, desires for acceptance, and complications with family. She also praises the game’s “natural” play through, as you don’t have to follow a specific path, but are guided throughout the narrative with goals and tasks.
3. **“The raw and honest writing is refreshing, providing something so different than the standard narrative.”**- Kimberly Wallace at Game Informer scored *Gone Home* a rating of 8.5/10. Claiming the game to hold some of the best writing she’s ever seen in a game, Kimberly praises the confessional, genuine emotions that Sam’s journal entries portray. She also praises the narrative’s true-to-life statements that allow the story to truly resonate with the player and leaves them thinking long after the moment.

## Lessons

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- **Pay close attention... not everything is as it seems on the surface.** On the surface, the Greenbrair estate seems like a normal home, until one begins picking up old notes, letters, and paying closer attention to the scenery. Here is where you can truly get to know the Greenbrair’s and realize that this beautiful home they live in doesn’t truly resemble all the emotional interactions happening behind the scenes. Without reading reading’s Jan’s tucked away note from Caroline, or finding files that are locked away in cabinets, the player would never know of Jan’s unfaithful feelings for Rick, or Terry’s troubles with writer’s block. Small attentions to detail, introduce a whole new level for the gameplay that changes the game from simply revolving around Sam’s issues to a clash of several individuals working through different problems.
- **Every object has a story.** If a picture is a thousand words, then being able to interact with physical environments can prove much more informational. Even the little design aspects that don’t seem like much add to the value of the story and to the perception of each character. For example, when playing the player finds

numerous boxes of empty pizza laying around in random locations, begging to question if somebody cooks food or does the family rely on takeout. A note later in the game reveals that Sam and Katie's parents are away for the weekend and left Sam money for pizza. Although seeming insignificant, such details foreshadowed events to come and eventually were important to fit with the entire narrative of the story.

- **Clear and impacting stories can be told without overloading the player with guidelines.** *Gone Home* does an amazing job of demonstrating that a game doesn't need a linear path or trail to truly convey a story. The player is given the freedom to roam the Greenbrair household freely and uncover details at their own pace, while providing minor controls on mobility such as a locked door that the player must locate a key for. The non-restricting progression of this game allows for a more natural, realistic gameplay which is one of the reasons the game is so successful in the first place.

## Summation

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To summarize, *Gone Home* is an amazing representation of an interactive slice-of-life game that emotionally invests the player through an exemplary narrative, realistic character progressions, and immersive environments that speak for themselves. After travelling through this emotional journey with Sam, the player truly feels a connection with the character and the moments experienced throughout the gameplay stick with the player way past the game's completion.