Straightening Up the Archive: Queer Historiography, Queer Play, and the Archival Politics of Gone Home

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Abstract
Since its release in August 2013, the critically acclaimed exploration game Gone Home has been mired in controversy, with politicized debates centering on its status as a game as well as on the much-lauded coming out narrative at its center. This article uses the varied response to Gone Home’s narrative and mechanical structures as an opportunity to reframe the discussion around the game in terms of how it invites players to engage with the objects and temporalities that compose its environment or, more specifically, its archive. Drawing from queer theory, historiography, and game studies, I argue that although Gone Home gestures toward the radical potential of archives, it ultimately undermines this potential by adhering to design conventions grounded in normative and normalizing logics. Through this analysis, I also suggest ways in which digital games can help us think through the politics of archives and of queerness as a historiographical method.

Keywords
video games, queer, computer games, historiography, Gone Home, archives

When The Fullbright Company released Gone Home in August 2013, the mainstream press praised the independent, first-person exploration video game for its environmental storytelling and pointed to its central coming out narrative as a sign of a maturing industry and of a medium ready to deal with more diverse themes and characters.1 As might be expected, given the climate of misogyny and homophobia within some

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gaming communities, many gamers met *Gone Home*’s critical success with suspicion and resentment. They spammed online forums and review aggregation sites with accusations of journalistic nepotism and liberal bias couched within critiques of the game itself. Commenters cited the lack of combat or puzzles as evidence that *Gone Home* was not a game at all, with some referring to it as a “walking simulator” or “basically a lesbian scavenger hunt” (“Steam Reviews” 2014). These attempts to delegitimize certain types of play (and players) fueled the ensuing debate over *Gone Home*’s status as a game, which so dominated popular discourse that Steve Gaynor, the game’s lead designer, gave a talk at the 2014 Game Developers Conference (GDC) titled “Why Is *Gone Home* a Game?”

These limiting terms of debate often obscure considerations of *Gone Home* on its own terms or of how the game’s design at once enables and severely limits player engagement with queer experience and history. Indeed, *Gone Home*’s narrative and mechanics are rooted in uncovering and reanimating the past. The premise is straightforward: it is 1995, and the player’s avatar, twenty-year-old Kaitlin (Katie) Greenbriar, has just returned to her family’s new home in the Pacific Northwest after spending a year abroad in Europe. Upon arriving in the middle of the night, she discovers an empty house and no clear trace of her family. Katie is left to rummage through the materials she finds in the house—notes, letters, journal entries, photos, drawings, cassettes, posters, school assignments, concert tickets, books, and so on—to uncover family secrets and piece together the whereabouts of her parents and sister. The game’s mechanics, in other words, do not “simulate walking” so much as they highlight and enact the ludic nature of archival research, with the player, as Katie, having to reconstruct a narrative through the examination and interpretation of primary source documents. As Katie navigates the house, depending on the thoroughness of the player’s research, she learns of her parents’ marital problems, her father’s failed writing career and subsequent alcohol dependency, and his history of abuse. Most prominently, though, she learns of her sister Samantha’s (Sam) struggles with her sexual identity, her encounters with Riot Grrrl culture, her first love with a girl named Lonnie, and her resultant arguments with her unsupportive parents.

Sam is, as Ian Bogost (2013) put it, “the star of *Gone Home*.” Her story is the subject of much of the game’s critical attention, and rightly so, as it is the most essential to the plot and the only narrative that the player must encounter to finish the game. Although players can bypass objects and documents pertaining to Katie’s parents, Terry and Jan, they must learn that Sam has run away with Lonnie for the game to trigger its ending sequence. Furthermore, the game gives a literal voice to Sam’s story as encounters with certain objects—a photograph or a piece of clothing, for instance—trigger nondiegetic audio recordings of Sam reading a related entry from her journal, providing context and insight into her narrative. The result, according to *GayGamer*’s Gavin Greene (2013), is “the most completely realized tale of coming out to be explored interactively.” Members of the mainstream gaming press agreed, though they often praised the game in universal rather than specific terms, alluding to “coming of age,” for instance, rather than “coming out.”
Remarketing on the significance of a game with a queer storyline being sold to a mainstream audience, Samantha Allen (2014) argues that *Gone Home* performs important cultural work by bridging the gap between niche queer games and mass market ones, putting queer experience at its center even as it targets a wide audience. A close examination of the game’s form, however, reveals that this bridge might be unstable, threatening to collapse under the weight of mainstream game design conventions and their resultant perpetuation of mainstream sensibilities. Game designer anna anthropy (2013) points to this tension, expressing reservations about the game’s capacity to convey queer experience through its approach to environmental storytelling. Articulating her inability to connect with the game, anthropy critiques the unfolding of Sam’s coming out story for being “too neat,” too convenient, and too structured like a puzzle to be solved. Although the game presents itself as open-ended, allowing the player to move through the world and discover and interpret the story freely, anthropy argues that it tends to provide players with key artifacts and information in a linear manner that imposes meaning on the artifacts and imbues them with explanatory power.

Anthropy’s objection is not that Sam’s experience does not reflect her own. Her concern, rather, recalls Lev Manovich’s (2001, 61) critique of the “myth of interactivity” and his assertion that ostensibly interactive media merely asks users to “follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations” that reflect the mental structures of the designer. At the same time, however, anthropy’s argument about the game’s method of transmitting information related to queer experience points to the heightened stakes of user engagement in *Gone Home*, given the game’s subject matter, and raises the possibility that even a game with a lesbian love story at its center might not, in fact, be queer. If the common debates around *Gone Home* center on defining or categorizing it in terms of its limitations, anthropy asks us to think beyond the terms of what players can or cannot do in the game and consider instead the broader theoretical implications of those limitations.

My goal in this article is not to place undue burdens on one of the few video games dealing explicitly with issues of diversity and sexuality to receive mainstream attention and accolades. Instead, I use the response to *Gone Home* as an opportunity to reframe the discussion around the game in terms of how it invites players to engage with the objects and temporalities that compose its environment or, more specifically, its archive. In doing so, I argue that the game exhibits an intrinsic tension between representation and gameplay, or queerness as topic and queerness as methodology. This tension echoes scholarship in queer historiography that challenges conventional historicist methods and calls for queer history to be understood not as something “to be filled in” by inserting marginalized voices into conventional historical narratives of progress, integration, and success but rather as a method of disrupting these narratives and their implicit values through more playful, political, and creative approaches to the historical record and to our understanding of time and archives (Chiang 2009, 17; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Freeman 2010). *Gone Home*, I argue, gestures toward the radical potential of archives but undermines this potential by adhering to design conventions typical of the games industry, even of designers not dependent on funding from major
publishers and working outside the context of high-budget, or AAA, development. It is a game about the transmission and construction of historical knowledge through archival contact but one whose narrative structure and game mechanics are grounded in the normative and normalizing logics that its subject matter purports to disrupt.

**The Greenbriar Home and the Promise of Archives**

*Gone Home* is essentially a game about engaging and exploring archives, its very title implying a feverish obsession with origins. Although the game’s story is fictional, the response to the game nonetheless illustrates the potential of virtual archival spaces to transmit knowledge and feeling related to queer history. The eponymous “home” serves as a vernacular archive, and the process of playing the game not only blurs the logics and labor of detectives and historians but also highlights the ludic nature of archival research. With three of its four designers having worked on the *Bioshock* franchise, a series of first-person shooters renowned for their intricate world building, *Gone Home* belongs to a lineage of games that communicate information about narrative and character through their spaces, environments, and objects, or what Henry Jenkins (2004) has called “narrative architecture.” At the same time, *Gone Home* expands on the tendency of many games to flesh out their worlds by littering their environments with meaningful objects, expansive journals, and audio diaries. What differentiates *Gone Home* from a game like *Bioshock* is that engagement with environmental objects is the primary activity afforded by the game’s mechanics: Katie can move through the space and interact with objects, nothing more.

We can locate much of the game’s critical potential in its construction of the archive and its implicit connection to queer history. As Jaimie Baron (2010, 303) has illustrated, digital games have the potential to create spaces that encourage players to challenge conventional, teleological modes of historiography, transforming “the ‘reader’ of history into the active ‘user’ or even ‘maker’ of history.” Although Baron is here referring to historical video games or those that incorporate actual archival content, her insights can be applied productively to *Gone Home*. In particular, she calls for games that refrain from imposing historical or archival materials onto linear narratives and instead use the game space to allow players to forge their own paths through them (Baron 2010, 310). At first glance, *Gone Home* seems to enact this approach to history, enabling players to sift through its materials on their own terms and asking players to engage with the temporality and spatiality of the archive in ways that go beyond treating the past in chronological or teleological terms. Time in *Gone Home* is often layered and entangled, and making sense of the world requires players to conceive of time thematically and relationally. In Baron’s terms, it invokes an archaeological understanding of history that emphasizes “layers of time laid over a particular space” (Baron 2010, 311). As Katie explores the house, multiple stories across multiple temporalities emerge at once, lending themselves to synchronic rather than diachronic interpretations. To take one example, as temporalities become intertwined, players can read Terry’s history of childhood sexual abuse alongside and in relation to his staunch resistance to his daughter’s sexual orientation in the present. The game avoids making
explicit causal connections between these layers of history; it merely invites players to consider the ways in which these histories are multiple, intertwined, and always up for interpretation.

Furthermore, *Gone Home* complicates any assumption that meaningful archives are simple repositories of official documents and unique objects. Instead, it stages the house as what Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 268) calls an “archive of feeling”—one “composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand history as a psychic need rather than a science.” It is an archive rooted in sentiment, emotion, and affect that validates the intimate and personal objects and documents of everyday life. These are messy archives made up of items that may otherwise be seen as disposable or ephemeral and, as Cvetkovich (2003, 243–44) notes, should be organized so as to provide an emotional rather than purely intellectual experience. *Gone Home*’s home does precisely this, perhaps more effectively than could any material archive bound to the dictates of administrative processing. It uses the space of the house to invest everyday objects (some of them literally found in the trash) with meaning and to relate them directly to lived practices and experiences. Discovering Sam and her girlfriend Lonnie’s zine in the secluded basement workspace alongside a cassette player, an empty pizza box, markers, a feminist comic book, and a Bratmobile poster says more about how that document functioned as part of daily life than the document itself ever could (Figure 1). Moreover, many of the objects in the game are of little value unto themselves but acquire significance only when contextualized through Sam’s voice-overs. Picking up an otherwise unremarkable bottle of hair dye, for instance, triggers a moving recording where Sam describes dying Lonnie’s hair and the intimacy of touching someone else’s scalp. In this instance, the bottle becomes evidence of the event and stands for the vulnerability and tenderness implicit in the moment. Attesting to the affective potency of this moment, game designer Zoe Quinn (2013) described how it recalled her own past and how, upon seeing the dye

Figure 1. Sam and Lonnie’s workspace.
bottle and the red stains in the bathtub, she knew “instantly . . . what that meant and [remembered] the delicate feeling of fingers running through my hair a decade ago.” As a way of embodying the game’s ability to recall her past in the present, Quinn dyed her hair red.

**Archival Storytelling and the Politics of Gating**

*Gone Home* has received well-earned praise for its evocative treatment of Sam’s coming out story, but as scholars like Adrienne Shaw (2015) and game designers like Merritt Kopas (2014) and Avery Mcdaldno and Joli St. Patrick (2013) remind us, the discourse around queerness and games needs to move beyond issues of representation or queer content. Instead, they ask us to think about how unconventional mechanics are necessary to disrupt the normative politics embedded within the systems and rules that structure many traditional games. Differentiating between straight and queer game mechanics, Mcdaldno and St. Patrick argue that a “veneer of queerness” does not make a game queer if the underlying mechanics continue to replicate logics of privilege. Instead of valuing mechanics that facilitate movement; encourage spatial, temporal, and technical mastery; promote individualism; and depend on clearly defined goals and linear character progression, these designers advocate for mechanics that challenge and destabilize—or queer—popular conceptions about what games can and should be.

For Kopas (2014), “straight” games, which include many mainstream games and especially those produced within AAA production contexts, tend to perpetuate the “male, colonial gaze,” regardless of the presence of queer characters or themes. They are, to borrow a phrase from Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009, xxxi), “games of empire” whose mechanics implicitly or explicitly reproduce the logics of conquest, conflict, and capital. By and large, the goal of many games across genres is to map, conquer, and control the game space and the things within it. Such games provide players with clearly defined goals and obstacles and reward them for their mastery of the game’s rules and systems, most often in the form of clear progress and eventual narrative closure. I would add that these normative mechanics, especially in exploration-based games that task players with reconstructing the past, invite a specific relationship to history. By feeding what could be called the archival imagination, or a faith in the revelatory and epistemological power of archives, they ground an assumption that a historical “truth” is accessible through rigorous engagement with archival materials.

It is worth noting that many of these straight mechanics have become naturalized and are seen within mainstream games criticism as well as within gaming communities as hallmarks of “good” or “coherent” design. As such, I want to be generous to the developers of *Gone Home* but critical of the industrial expectations that make it difficult for games to break with convention and remain commercially viable. *Gone Home*’s lead designer, Steve Gaynor, acknowledged that the game could appeal to groups of “non-gamers” drawn to the unconventional subject matter but that the design team ultimately created *Gone Home* with the imagined core audience of *BioShock* in
mind—the primarily straight, white, male “PC gamers that read *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* [and who are] looking actively for new experiences” (Gaynor 2014). To be sure, *Gone Home* does disrupt some normative conventions—for example, by eschewing combat and fail states—to be more accessible to players outside of core gaming communities (Gaynor 2014). Nevertheless, it relies on many conventional narrative and mechanical structures, especially in relation to spatial and temporal mastery, and this alone is enough to limit the horizons of political possibility to which the game can aspire.

Although *Gone Home* may seem initially to queer history on a methodological rather than merely representational level, the methods through which it transmits story information remain haunted by internal tensions that limit the degree to which players can move freely through the virtual space and engage with the game’s historical objects. When describing his approach to game design, Gaynor explains that *Gone Home* incorporates a number of design techniques that he learned while making AAA games that are meant to anticipate player psychology and guide the player through the space (and therefore story) in a determined, ordered way. These “gating” techniques, which Gaynor cites as hallmarks of good level design, can range from subtle lighting cues and strategic object placement to more explicitly impeding progress until the player has met certain conditions or uncovered certain information (Couch 2014; Sawrey 2013). As Gaynor elaborated in his presentation at GDC 2015, gating techniques are ultimately employed to “make the house and the story feel non-linear” even when they are not. *Gone Home* promises an archive free for exploration and interpretation but ultimately presents its story as a curated museum exhibit.

In many ways, *Gone Home* literalizes the process of straightening that Sara Ahmed (2006) details in *Queer Phenomenology*. The gating techniques work to negate or “correct” the possibility of queer temporality and spatiality that the game might otherwise enable. Although I am not committed to a strict phenomenological reading of the game, I do think that Ahmed’s language is especially useful for thinking through the political implications of moving through and interacting with objects within a virtual space. Especially pertinent is her discussion of the spatiality of orientation and the relationship between orientation and familiarity, or, as she puts it, “finding our way” and, appropriately, “feeling at home” (Ahmed 2006, 7–9). For Ahmed, heteronormative culture directs bodies toward certain objects instead of others, operating as a “straightening device” that rereads the slant of queerness and redirects bodies toward normative objects, perpetuating and naturalizing “straight” lines of direction (Ahmed 2006, 23). *Gone Home*’s gating techniques function in this way. Not only do they work to structure the player’s movement through the space but they also direct the player toward certain normative interpretations, associations, and assumptions at the expense of others, ultimately writing history in terms of a conventional, teleological three-act structure.

In this sense, *Gone Home*’s archival openness is put in tension with storytelling techniques that serve to pull these histories apart, order them, and impose meaning on them. The objects available to players upon entering the house, for instance, introduce us to Sam and Lonnie as characters and hint at the romance plot. By following a set of clues, players eventually learn of their first kiss and, at the same time, acquire the key
to the basement, or the second act. Objects in the basement recount the escalation of the romance plot and introduce potential impediments to the relationship, as Lonnie decides to join the military. Players soon locate the key to the attic where the conflict resolves when they locate Sam’s diary, which offers an explanation as to her whereabouts. Sam, it turns out, has stolen the family’s VCRs and run off with Lonnie, who has decided against joining the Army. Sam is apologetic that she can’t explain her choice to Katie in person and hopes that Katie “won’t be sad, and you won’t hate me, and you’ll just know that I am where I need to be.” Sam ends her final journal entry by promising that she will see her sister again “someday” as the credits begin to roll. The conclusiveness of the ending and the fact that it is triggered by a single specific object suggest that there is a correct, natural end point to the archive and the stories it can tell. All previous objects are relegated to the past and put in service of the present narrative.

There is no reason the archival objects in the house have to tell precisely this story in precisely this manner. The same objects encountered in a different order may tell a much less optimistic, less digestible, and more disorienting one, but the game nudges players to encounter them in a way that provides a clear narrative arc. Mirroring and complementing the resolution of Sam’s story is the similarly optimistic conclusion of Terry and Jan’s arcs. After Katie unlocks and explores the game’s final few areas, she realizes that one of Terry’s books has gone back into publication and that her parents are away at a couples’ retreat. Despite earlier signs of an unhappy, if not outright destructive, marriage, the game asks players to accept the parents’ narrative arc as resulting in the possible and, the game suggests, desirable redemption of the family unit.

I do not mean to suggest that the game, and Sam’s narrative in particular, should end pessimistically. As critics like kopas (2013) and Maddy Myers (2013) note, there are political stakes involved in imagining hopeful futures for queer characters and resisting the tragedy that often accompanies stories of queer love. My argument is rather that the game actively resists alternate imaginings supported by its own archive that might call its underlying values into question. Instead of finding “joy and excitement in the horror” of disorder and disorientation, Gone Home’s narrative enacts a process of organized unqueering (Ahmed 2006, 4). As narrative and mechanics work in tandem, Katie uncovers Sam’s secrets by mapping the space and organizing the narrative, a process that is even reflected in the game’s user interface. Finding one of Sam’s secret passages, where she hides intimate documents away from the prying eyes of her parents, fills the area on the game’s virtual map, and the game neatly organizes journal entries into a strict chronology. Through gating techniques, the game moves the player through the space and the narrative in a straight line, offering up conventional narratives of monogamous love, self-discovery, and the redemption of the family while erasing and disavowing the traces of queer intimacy and heterosexual disconnect that define the home at the beginning of the game. In short, this produces the archive as a site of stasis rather than, in Kate Eichhorn’s (2013, 9) terms, a space of possibility that provides a way to imagine “other ways to live in the present.”
Importantly, the player’s process of coming to be “at home” in the game world is framed as narratively symmetrical to Sam’s coming to feel “at home” with her identity, and the increasing orientation within the narrative and virtual space of the house is mapped onto Sam’s understanding of sexual orientation. As Katie learns more about Sam, the space becomes coherent, familiar, and navigable. Horror tropes, such as flickering lights or red dye stains that can be mistaken for blood, are all revealed to be red herrings, and though the house may never be fully comforting, it is certainly less threatening and ominous by the end. This, however, is a false symmetry that discourages a more critical reading of the ending. Although Katie’s narrative is one of spatial and epistemological mastery, as she finds all of her answers in the impossibly complete domestic archive, Sam’s narrative remains one of disorientation, of coming to terms with a world—and a home—that does not allow her to move through it fluidly. Yet by its very design, the game equates the player’s mastery of the game’s spaces and systems with narrative closure. As the player’s/Katie’s quest comes to a successful end, so too must Sam’s. To return to anthropy’s critique, the game presents identity formation as something straightforward and teleological, each step leading neatly into the next. Gone Home offers uncomplicated, easily digestible queer history at the expense of queering history, replicating traditional master narratives, and moving the player away from the disorienting, disruptive, and potentially transformative narratives that the open archive affords and demands.

Tourists in the Archive

Although Gone Home uses structured gating techniques to disseminate story information and encourage normative interpretative frameworks, this does not render the player, as Katie, exempt from critique; the game’s mechanics invite players to enact the logics of privilege and become complicit in its construction of queer history. In doing so, Gone Home disavows the ethical implications of working with personal archives and instead encourages players to adopt a touristic understanding of archives as reified repositories of experience. The subjectivity of the player’s avatar, Katie, systemically reproduces the tendency of queer stories and experiences to be appropriated by and mediated through normative paradigms. Players know Katie’s family, and Sam in particular, only through the lens of Katie’s highly normative body. We can locate clues to the dominant logic defining Katie’s (and, in turn, the player’s) mode of engaging with the world in the few objects tied to her character (Figure 2). Katie is the paradigmatic good sister who is socially rewarded and valued for her normativity. She is athletic and excels at school, and her relationship to order and authority is put in direct contrast to Sam’s. Perhaps most significantly, as communicated through the postcards from her European vacation strewn throughout the house, Katie is a tourist, and these postcards illustrate a commitment to the superficial, stereotypical, and consumable aspects of culture. The extent to which her postcards present her as the quintessential tourist borders on comical. She writes of doing “many Parisian things” like wearing berets and visiting the Shakespeare & Company bookstore, jokes about getting gored by bulls in Barcelona, and recounts excitedly her passage through the
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Chunnel. Although the game arguably uses these postcards as a tongue-in-cheek way to differentiate Katie’s privileged experiences from Sam’s and to criticize Katie’s relationship to difference, any critique is undercut by the game’s systems. The game asks players to apply the same touristic logic to their own exploration of the domestic archive and encourages them to explore it without the consideration that an anthropologist or historian might exhibit but rather with the tourist’s unencumbered desire to see and consume the other.

Lisa Nakamura (2002) has shown how Dean MacCannell’s work on tourism can be mapped onto the racial and cultural appropriation that takes place within digital spaces and virtual worlds, especially in relation to the practice of racial role-play in online multiplayer games. For Nakamura (2002, 55), racial role-players adopt other racialized personae as part of a pursuit of cultural authenticity grounded in their own understanding of otherness. Although Gone Home does not enable racial or cultural role-playing per se, it does traffic in the same assumption of privilege and search for cultural authenticity that defines the tourist, though it replicates these logics systemically rather than representationally. As with the tourist, Katie’s privilege allows her to “put on” or consume Frenchness or Spanishness in search of an authentic experience, filtered, of course, through her own conception of what authenticity does or should entail. Gone Home presents lives and experiences as mysteries to be solved, and it presents the material culture connected to these lives and experiences as up for grabs and open to scrutiny. As Katie scours the house, examining and interacting with objects connected to Sam’s (or her parents’) narrative, the objects become part of the game’s larger narrative: Katie’s quest to reconstruct authentic personal histories.

Initially, Gone Home frames Katie’s and the player’s exploration as a kind of trespassing; when Katie approaches the front door at the beginning of the game, Sam has left her a message imploring, “Please, please don’t go digging around trying to find out where I am. I don’t want anyone to know.” Players, of course, are expected to ignore

Figure 2. One of Katie’s many achievements.
Sam’s wishes. Moreover, the game uncomplicates the potentially transgressive act of snooping and disavows any ethical complications by framing Sam’s story as one crafted specifically for Katie’s consumption. At the end of the game, Katie locates a folder labeled “Letter for Katie,” containing a number of letters, the contents of which make up the audio diaries players have been hearing throughout the game. Not only, in other words, do the audio recordings have a diegetic source but they are also framed as a collection of letters left by Sam and addressed to Katie, thus validating her tourism. In the ultimate fantasy of archival privilege, archival materials present themselves as being created for the user’s benefit, the personal stories within offering themselves up to be appropriated or assimilated into other narratives. An occasion to use the game to think through the implications of privilege ultimately defers to expected game conventions that promise pleasures of empowerment, agency, and unencumbered access.

When questioned about his authority to write a story centered on a queer woman’s experience in the mid-1990s, Gaynor elaborated on his research methods, which included watching 1990s teen drama My So Called Life, interviewing friends, reading fiction and nonfiction, and scouring blogs. Gaynor said, “I relied on interviews and research into the experiences that others had in their own lives” to “understand that perspective in a more nuanced way” (“Good Old Christmas Duck” 2014). In numerous interviews and talks, Gaynor illustrated an awareness of his role in writing materials meant to be from the perspective of the other. Furthermore, he acknowledged the challenge and risk involved in the process, often repeating the mantra that his job was to “do the research, understand these people’s experiences, and try to represent them as authentically as possible” (Gaynor 2014). Although Gaynor’s desire to produce a game that “authentically” represents the experiences of a marginalized group comes from a place of respect, his belief in authenticity as an ideal and achievable goal points to how the privilege implicit in the game’s structure is reflective of its production process. I do not wish to suggest that artists should only create what they know, nor do I mean to undermine the voices of players who felt that Sam’s story did speak to their own in very real ways. Rather, I mean to illustrate how easily the logics and language of privilege that manifest at the level of production—in this case, the supposition that doing the work and doing the research is the gateway to grasping and reproducing an “authentic” and experiential past—can seep into the DNA of a game.

There is, it should be noted, a single moment when Gone Home’s design, through the subjectivity of Katie, takes complete agency away from the player, seemingly challenging the privileged access of the tourist in relation to the game’s archival objects. When exploring the basement of the house, Katie discovers what appears to be a discarded page of Sam’s journal detailing Sam and Lonnie’s first sexual encounter. For the first and only time, the game prevents the player from reading the note for more than a few seconds. Instead, Katie closes the note and refuses to open it again. If the player clicks on the note, the words “Nope. Not gonna happen” or “Okay, not reading any more of that” appear onscreen, indicating Katie’s assertion of her own subjectivity in the face of player desire. On one hand, this moment arguably serves as meta-commentary, an example of the game denying an unimpeded touristic encounter with archives and refusing to participate in the exploitation of female sexuality. What might
be an Easter egg in another game—Konami’s popular stealth-action franchise *Metal Gear Solid*, for instance, is notorious for rewarding player exploration and experimentation with nudity—is denied in *Gone Home*. On the other hand, this moment seems motivated more by Katie’s characteristic prudishness or squeamishness at the thought of her family members’ sex lives (she reacts similarly when she locates her parents’ condoms) than by any ethical considerations or desire to defer her own subjectivity to Sam’s. No other encounter with intimate or personal moments causes Katie to censor her voyeurism. The result is a way for the designers to have their cake and eat it too; they activate players’ voyeuristic impulse while denying their own complicity.

Gaynor’s (2014) GDC talk addressed this ambivalence. He noted that although he wanted to acknowledge that Sam and Lonnie were in a sexual relationship, he realized that the letter is “kind of titillating, and that’s really not the point,” and that having Katie read the entire letter would not conform to her character. As such, the developers programmed a script to take control away from the player to “characterize Katie systemically” and remind players that they are playing as Sam’s sister. In effect, this did not dispel titillation so much as it served to heighten interest in the document. By allowing the player-as-Katie to peek at the contents of the letter but not read it completely, the game ignited the touristic impulses of players and brought them into the real world. Indeed, the meta-game that emerged following the (almost immediate) screen grabbing and posting of the letter on online forums explored the ethical stakes of reading the letter more concretely than could *Gone Home* itself. When players posted screenshots online, making once-forbidden information readily available, they implicitly framed the act of accessing and reading the letter in terms of archival ethics, putting the desire to know and complete the historical record in tension with the privacy of the absent subject. Game designer and critic Naomi Clark (2013) asked the underlying ethical question directly. At the end of her discussion of the infamous note, Clark acknowledged that “there’s no resisting the spread of information” and included a link to a screenshot but not before posing a series of questions: “Do you really want to invade the privacy of a fictional teenage girl’s thoughts about her first lesbian sexual encounter? Even though her sister . . . would rather you didn’t?” In doing so, Clark asked questions of the player that the game itself, so tied to the gamic idea that digital spaces are made for the player’s consumption, does not.

**Reimagining Home**

My formalist critique cannot, of course, account fully for the experience of playing *Gone Home*, and it deserves its own destabilization and disruption. My analysis so far has assumed that players play through the game on its default settings—what the developers call its “standard” or “canonical” form—and adhere to the game’s address (Gaynor 2013), which is not always the case. As Miguel Sicart (2011) reminds us, this type of procedural analysis locates meaning *exclusively* in a game’s formal systems and ignores how those systems can be appropriated or redefined through play. As he notes, in language that strongly echoes Ahmed’s, exploring individual play allows us to focus “on how curves reassert themselves over straight lines.” As such, I conclude
with a brief look at how a few players have taken advantage of the game’s affordances to invent alternative modes of play, effectively queering the game on their own terms by changing their avatar’s relationship to narrative, space, and the ubiquitous contents of the house. In doing so, I aim to illustrate how methods of play can implicitly resist causality or linearity and disrupt the normative and normalizing historiographical frameworks the game invites.

Online forums are replete with fan art and fan fiction based on Gone Home, but players also make use of the game itself as an outlet for artistic and critical expression. For some players, the game becomes a space in which they can articulate their personal affective relationship to characters or objects. A shrine to Lonnie (Figure 3), for instance, collects photographs, cassettes, buttons, items of clothing, and other objects that speak specifically to Sam and Lonnie’s relationship (Brown 2013). In assembling and curating this collection, the player not only communicates his or her emotional investment in the story but also effectively writes Katie out of it, choosing instead to imagine himself or herself as Sam. Another player resists the game’s attempt to recuperate the family structure by posting an animated GIF of Katie picking up a family photograph in the game and promptly throwing it into the garbage (KeNo 2014).

Other players circumvent the game’s narrative structures outright and treat the house as a space of pure play, rejecting meaning for chaos (or locating meaning in chaos). A significant number of screenshots posted to the game’s Steam Community forum depict meticulously organized drawers or, conversely, horribly messy closets or floors filled with (quite literally) every interactive object in the game. In these instances, objects are removed from their contexts and lose their designer-intended narrative meanings, and the house becomes a site of experimentation in the present rather than a portal to the past.

Perhaps most surprising of all was an article published on popular entertainment website IGN.com. IGN’s readership is a reported 73 percent male, and its corporate website boasts of having one of the Internet’s highest concentration of male readers.
within the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old demographic (IGN Entertainment 2015). Its gaming sites privilege previews and reviews over editorial content, and although it does cover independent gaming, its major features are, by and large, devoted to mainstream, big-budget AAA titles. Yet in December 2013, IGN posted a playful story by game critic and designer Cara Ellison that reread *Gone Home* through the perspective of its “tragic unsung hero:” Christmas Duck. What followed was a series of screenshots of one of the game’s objects, the Christmas Duck, in a variety of situations as he made his way from his starting point on the front porch to his final resting place in the attic. Along the way, the article noted, Christmas Duck organized a séance, drunkenly flirted with one of Katie’s stuffed animals, and accidentally killed a man. The entire article is joyfully absurd, tangential, and unlike the majority of the website’s content. As Ellison (2013) queered the game by rejecting the official archive and narrating her own story through a secondary object, she also queered the website itself and destabilized, if only for a moment, conceptions of what mainstream games journalism can or should be.

This type of playfulness is certainly not unique to *Gone Home*, but it takes on a different valence in the context of this specific fictional world. These playful moments read against the grain of the archive and use the available materials to imagine different relationships, different stories, and different futures. Intentionally or not, these enactments put the archive in contact with queer methodologies and exhibit an implicit archival politics that is less about going home and more about rethinking the meaning of home altogether.

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**Notes**

1. *Gone Home* was initially released on Windows, OS X, and Linux platforms. It was ported to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One consoles in January 2016.
3. Recently, some developers of similar exploration-based games, such as the British independent studio The Chinese Room, have attempted to reclaim the term “walking simulator” (Pinchebeck 2015). When applied to *Gone Home* in 2013, however, the term was almost always meant in a condescending manner.
5. It should be noted that the game does offer a series of modifiers meant to work against the gating techniques by, for instance, unlocking all the doors or disabling the map. However,
as Gaynor (2013) makes clear, playing the game without modifiers “is the canonical way to play, the experience that we’ve designed as intended.”

6. Early versions of the game did not include the note, but the developers included it as a way to encourage players to explore the space.

7. This shrine even caught the attention of the developers who cited it during their 2014 Game Developers Conference (GDC) talk as evidence that Gone Home is a game.

References


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