English 230 Worksheet for Tuesday, October 11th
Gone Home
Available on PC and consoles or via no-commentary playthroughs

Released by the Fullbright company in 2013, *Gone Home* is a first-person exploration game, or "walking simulator," where people play as 21-year-old Kaitlin "Katie" Greenbriar, who arrives home in Boon County, Oregon on 7 June 1995. The game is set inside the house, which is empty, and players navigate its two storeys, basement, garage, and attic to learn more about Katie's family and their history, with a focus on the life of Katie's 17-year-old sister, Samantha "Sam" Greenbriar, and her girlfriend, Yolanda "Lonnie" DeSoto.

Gone Home is part love story, part detective film, part melodrama, all contained by a homophobic domestic space. It was prototyped in the engine for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, a survival horror game, which gives the Greenbriar house a spooky feel. Meanwhile, its first-person camera follows a long history of subjective shots in film, including Buster Keaton's *Go West* (1925; see below; the camera's mounted on a bull) as well as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945; also below; the perspective of a gun), plus the first-person perspective in games like *Doom* (1993) and *Half-Life* (1998). (For more on the subjective shot in film and its relation to games, see Alexander Galloway's "Origins of the First-Person Shooter," Chapter 2 of *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 2006.)

There is a lot to say about the visuals of *Gone Home*; however, I am going to focus on its use of audio for this worksheet. The game has a soundscape, or atmosphere, that evokes David Lynch's 1990 television series, *Twin Peaks*. The *Gone Home* score (MX), by Chris Remo, resembles Angelo Badalamenti and Lynch's now-famous music for *Twin Peaks* in many ways, including its tempo and use of synth and reverb, and an image of characters from Lynch's show appear on Sam's locker in her room. Remo's score produces a calm yet haunting mood in the Greenbriar house, particularly when coupled with radio and television sound effects (SFX) and the ambient sounds (BG) of thunderstorms outside. Is this a haunted mansion? Has someone plotted a murder? Of course, Remo's music also adds a layer of history to the game, set in Oregon during the mid-1990s. (*Twin Peaks* is set in the nearby state of Washington.)

Beyond the atmosphere, Fullbright fills the house with historical nods to the Pacific Northwest music scene, from 1990s magazines and concert posters to riot grrrl zines and Heavens to Betsy and Bratmobile tapes (see below). These traces of recent history can be treated like objects to be inspected. Players can pick them up, zoom in, and rotate them to attend to details and stumble upon hints. They

can also play the tapes in Sam's room. Audio therefore functions as both an environment (Remo's Lynch-like score with thunderstorms in the background) and a thing (stuff like tapes) in the game, surrounding Katie yet also in her hands, which we cannot see. (There are no mirrors in the house, either.)
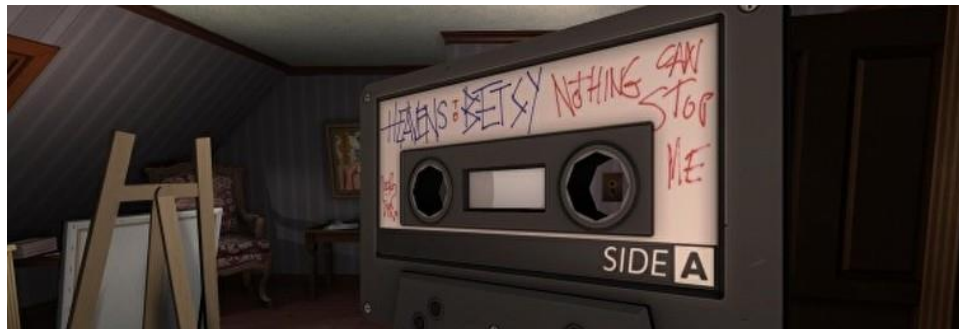
As players navigate the Greenbriar house and weave together snippets of local and family history—a form of "environmental storytelling" relying on the spatial distribution of letters, photographs, books, tapes, and household objects—they also hear voice-over from Katie (performed by Sarah Elmaleh) and Sam (performed by Sarah Grayson). Not everything in the house can be accessed at once, though. Some doors require keys, and particular objects help to unlock new areas. The voice-over audio is frequently linked to these "access" activities as well as to an "audio diary" of entries by Sam.

Performing certain actions triggers playback of the diary, yet players are not meant to assume the diary is really a tape or that Sam's left a bunch of recordings lying around the house for Katie (or someone else) to ultimately find and piece together, like a detective, into a complete story. Rather, the audio diary is a series of flashbacks. As a key feature of the game's design and a core component of its content, the diary projects a "mind's ear": Katie hearing Sam's voice as she reads Sam's journal, found in the attic at the end of the game. *Actual Katie is in the attic as the game unfolds, and players retrace Katie's steps, listening to Sam and Katie speak along the way*. The game is, in a way, already finished when you start it.

This aspect of the game's audio overlaps with eavesdropping: a sonic version of voyeurism or "snooping." Bo Ruberg (2019) writes: "In the note on the front door . . . Sam begs Katie not to go digging around, rummaging through the intimate details of her friendship, but that is the very premise of the gameplay. What does it mean for the player, in the role of a straight person, to uncover and consume (in the sense of media consumption) her sister's queer story against her wishes?" (18). (See Ruberg's "Straight Paths through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in *Gone Home*" in volume 15, issue 6, of *Games and Culture*.) Following Ruberg, how is listening a form of power or appropriation in the game? And to what effects does *Gone Home*'s use of audio correspond with player responses to its queer representation and love story? (Also see Brigid Kennedy's "Space, Navigation, and Queerness in *Gone Home*; or Toward a Queer Spatiality," in *First Person Scholar*, 2020.)

Questions such as these demonstrate why audio matters for both design *and* content. What do you make of *Gone Home*'s BG, VO, MX, DX, FOL, and SFX? What do they contribute to the storytelling?

P.S.: Check out this post on *Gone Home*'s use of Foley: https://fullbright.company/2013/05/28/sounds-of-a-house/.