Unfamiliar Feminine Spaces in *Gone Home's* Environmental Storytelling

Magdalena Bednorz
University of Silesia
Katowice, Poland
(+)48 608048915
magdalena.bednorz@us.edu.pl

ABSTRACT

Spatiality of digital environments, including video games, is not only one of the defining aspects of the medium (Murray 2001), but also an aspect through which medium-specific types of narratives can be communicated to the audience. It allows for environmental (or diegetic) storytelling – a narrative method in which the story originates from exploration (Carson 2000; Peirce 2007; Smith and Worch 2010), in which the player traverses the game space and discovers pieces of information in the form of artifacts and elements of the environment. Among the games which broadly employ this type of storytelling is The Fullbright Company's first-person adventure exploration game Gone Home (2013). In the game, the player assumes the role of Katie, who returns home after a year abroad only to find her family house deserted. By spatial exploration focused mainly on searching the house, the player, through Katie, can solve the mystery and discover the story of coming of age, discovering one's sexuality, and coping with the aftermath. Doing so requires interacting with objects placed within the house—they seem to work as a conduit of the narrative, not only informing of the recent events by themselves (e.g. notes, pictures), but also occasionally triggering additional audio-narration.

Furthermore, those objects, along with their placement within the space of the game, become tools of world—they constitute believable space, fill it with meaning, contribute to the construction of characters, and provide social contexts. Firstly, the game's focus is on the mundane, the domestic. The entire house seems lived-in, filled with traces of everyday life, such as coffee mugs or used clothing, adding to the effect of familiarity and intimacy of the traversed space. Secondly, the space itself is divided into areas attributed to different family members. The spaces belonging to women are filled with objects associated with the construction and performance of femininity, such as bras or nail polish, and some rooms introduce cultural artifacts (such as specific magazines or cassettes) as references to queer cultural identities. They seem to function as rhetorical devices, focusing characterization while simultaneously communicating the gendered social identities and contextualizing the story. Finally, employed within the game are several established conventions and visual techniques of the horror genre, such as flickering lights, secret passages in the walls, or sounds of an ongoing storm or creaking floor. They not only complement a ghost story accompanying the main narrative, but also help communicate the tension of the main storyline, mixing the feminine and the queer with the fantastic and terrifying, and defamiliarizing the domestic environment.

This presentation approaches the abovementioned aspects of Gone Home's game world through the theoretical lens drawing from the perspectives provided by humanist theories

concerning material culture—following the assumptions that objects can convey and communicate emotions, thoughts, and even identities (Woodward 2007, Turkle 2011), as well as participate in the processes of world-building, storytelling, and narrative comprehension (Wolf 2012). Moreover, it borrows from the concept of 'poetic artifaction', understood as providing social objects with poetic function by employing them within texts of culture (Lebek 2017), thus assuming that within narratives objects, as well as spaces in which they are placed, can communicate social identities, emotions and poetically encoded meanings. This view, in turn, is complemented by the take on how the architectural specifics of space can encompass and evoke the feeling of uncanny, widely associated with the unfamiliar and fantastic (Wilder 1992).

While *Gone Home* has been discussed in detail by scholars interested in both the affective, nostalgia-inducing potential of environmental storytelling (Sloan 2014, Veale 2016) and the queer narratives and poetics within that particular title (Pavlounis 2016, Snyder 2018, Ruberg 2019), the goal of this presentation is to approach the game specifically in regards of its fantastic, horror-reminiscent aspects and aesthetics, as they are present within the game environment, and to investigate their role in the larger meaning-making process. As such, the presentation aims to combine the abovementioned theoretical perspectives in the analysis of the specific ways in which the familiarity, femininity and eeriness of the game world of *Gone Home* are crafted and intermingled with one another, as well as with the pre-established narrative. Specifically, the focus will be on the intertwining between the poetics of the (queer) feminine and the fantastic, or— on the ways in which femininity and sexuality can be conveyed through space and objects within it, while said space is defamiliarized through the use of the poetics of horror, which both complements the narrative and strengthens the emotional effects it might have on the audience. In other words, those horroresque poetics of space will be discussed in terms of their rhetorical potential, as they serve as a framing device to the narrative and at the same time they communicate emotional meanings to the audience. The presentation will discuss the employment of cultural references of the fantastic within the spatial dimension of the game, and in doing so, it will explore the potential of the fantastic to communicate the emotional and cultural meanings, as well as the unique means of communicating and crafting such fantasticity within the digital medium. As such, the presentation will further explore the specificity of the medium of video games in the context of object-driven narratives, and the potential of the games with exploratory emphasis to shift the focus towards objects and their poetics, placing them as both world-building tools and main agents in the generation of the narrative.

Keywords
environmental storytelling, space, femininity, material culture, horror

BIBLIOGRAPHY
The Fullbright Company. 2013. *Gone Home*. PC Computer, Online Game. Portland, Oregon, USA: The Fullbright Company.
Carson, D. 2000. "Environmental Storytelling: Creating Immersive 3D Worlds Using Lessons Learned from the Theme Park Industry." Gamasutra. Available at: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3186/environmental_storytelling_.php.
Lebek, K. 2017. "The Poetics of Objects in *True Detective*." In *Materiality and Popular Culture: The Popular Life of Things*, edited by A. Malinowska, K. Lebek, 179-192. New York: Routledge.
Murray, Janet. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York, London: The Free Press.

Pavlounis, D. 2016. "Straightening Up the Archive: Queer Historiography, Queer Play, and the Archival Politics of *Gone Home*." *Television & New Media*. 17 (7), 579-594.

Peirce, C. 1998. *Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 2.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ruberg, B. 2019. "Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in *Gone Home*." Games and Culture. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019826746

Sloan, R. J. S. 2014. "Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home." *Games and Culture*. 10 (6), 525-550.

Smith, H., and Worch, M. 2010. "What Happened Here? Environmental Storytelling." Presented at *Game Developers Conference*, San Francisco. Available at: http://www.worch.com/2010/03/11/gdc-2010/.

Snyder, S. 2018. "The impossible relationship: Deconstructing the private space in *Gone Home*." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*. 10 (1), 7-20.

Turkle, S. 2011. *Evocative Objects. Things We Think With.* Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.

Veale, K. 2016. "Gone Home, and the power of affective nostalgia." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 23 (7), 654-666.

Vidler, A. 1992*. The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely.* Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.

Wolf, M. J. P. 2012. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub-creation*. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Woodward, I. 2007. *Understanding Material Culture.* Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore: Sage Publications.