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An "Exploration" of *Gone Home*'s Storytelling and Gameplay Mechanics

Most people presented with the beginning of *Gone Home* - a dark and empty house, and a cryptic note from a younger sister begging not to look for her - would probably turn tail and run to the police. But our protagonist, Katie Greenbriar, seems to be made out of tougher stuff, and as players, we have no choice but to apprehensively enter her parents' large, creepy home.

In comparison to most triple-A games of the present, the premise of *Gone Home* can seem outright mundane. Why would players want to walk around an empty house when they could shoot terrorists in *Call of Duty*'s hyper-realistic environments, or knock Nintendo characters off of brightly colored stages in the newest iteration of *Super Smash Brothers*? To add insult to injury, its game world, which consists of a single house, is miniscule compared to worlds in recent games such as *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* or *No Man's Sky*. And yet, in some ways, *Gone Home*'s world is as targeted at Bartle's "explorer" type players[1] as any procedurally generated universe is. The game encourages scoping out every nook and cranny of the house, and while it is not required to delve into all the corners of the house to complete the game, the amount of exploration players do is directly correlated to the number of puzzles pieces they can put together about the Greenbriar family's lives.

There are a certain number of story elements that the player is required to find in order to progress in the game. However, the full story is only available to those who are most willing to scour the house from top to bottom. It is easy to ignore extraneous information about the Greenbriar parents after figuring out that Sam's notes are the key to completing the game, but we cannot truly understand the family without it. The prime instance of this extra layer of detail for those who care to find it is unarguably Terry Greenbriar's backstory. Most players will discover

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1. Bartle states that: "Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them…[and believe that] the real fun comes only from discovery, and making the most complete set of maps in existence."

simply by rummaging through Terry Greenbriar's possessions that the house was inherited from his great uncle Oscar and that he is a struggling author obsessed with preventing JFK's assassination. However, another level to this story is available only to the "explorer" players: by thoroughly searching the basement, we discover a child's toy in a dark room that has no place being there, and drug paraphernalia in a safe with the passcode 1963. What we can deduce is that Oscar, a mentally unstable drug addict, abused young Terry in the year 1963, and even as an adult, Terry is fixated on changing the events of that year - hence, his failed series of novels about saving JFK from his 1963 assassination. It is impossible to infer this key part of Greenbriar family history without careful and systematic exploration, and by making these story elements exclusively available to explorers, *Gone Home*'s designers are rewarding players who have the drive and curiosity to explore beyond the limits of what is required.

However, in setting their sights on providing explorer players with a better story, *Gone Home's* designers missed out on some of the aspects of explorative gameplay that make huge open world games so appealing. The game is not linear per se, but once we happen upon Sam's trail of bread crumbs, our path is essentially laid out for us. This is not to say that we don't have free will; in fact, it's quite the opposite. Each room in the Greenbriar house is an open environment that we can interact with in any way we wish to. However, we cannot progress without finding Sam's notes - we cannot open the various secret doors scattered through the house, and we cannot locate keys to certain areas without her guidance. While the latter seems plausible since it is Katie's first time in this house, the former is somewhat contrived. Players who enjoy exploring should be allowed to come across these secret passages on their own, and this would make the game considerably more realistic and non-linear. While *Gone Home* excels

in giving players an immersive storytelling experience, the linearity does prevent it from reaching a level where we feel fully immersed.

Furthermore, while the idea of rewarding explorer players with extra story elements is commendable, each characters' story feels strangely disconnected from the others. Each character seems to have their own set of rooms in the large house, which allows players to learn about the characters in an uninterrupted and immersive manner, but has the effect of isolating them from each other. Very few of the objects that we encounter as players suggest a strong family connection - save for some notes from Sam's parents addressed to her, and an encouraging message from Jan on one of Terry's manuscripts, the family seems to have very little interaction with each other, even if this is not the canonical case. If not for the large family oil painting, it would almost seem as if the Greenbriars are actually just three strangers who live in the same boarding house.

We can conclude that *Gone Home*'s producers created many details that built up each character individually, but missed the mark on bringing them all together. However, the main story that players were meant to hear - Sam's story - remains a shining star on its own, and makes a strong case for storytelling without unnecessary gameplay mechanics or overcomplicated plotlines. Sam's poignant tale of first love is, at its core, a story best told through the explorative experience that *Gone Home* provides for us. We are given the chance to travel alongside Sam on her journey of self-discovery, and it feels like we are with her every step of the way. Her happy ending is our happy ending as well.