

Play Log 3: Gone Home

Audio and Atmosphere as Substance

Gone Home is a game where the player inhabits the role of Kaitlin Greebriar as she goes through her family's house. It is immediately established through a phone call that she had just arrived from traveling abroad, but for reasons unclear until later on, the house shows no signs of life. The player is free to roam about, exploring the house and interacting with various objects within the house. In piecing together bits of information through multiple different modalities, Kaitlin and the player piece together what happened between her sister and her parents prior to her arrival. The player and Kaitlin are put in a position of knowing nothing upon entering, and it is up to them to source information. The game is not stingy and does not attempt to be esoteric in the way that it presents its information, but it is designed in such a way that even the most fundamental information has to be found first. This is especially exemplified in the game's use of its auditory elements. The game's audio elements (or the lack of) play a pivotal role in setting the game's atmosphere and in surreptitiously motivating its player to continue in addition to being feeding the player essential information and facilitating meaningful play.

There is oftentimes a bias in how people experience games where the visual takes precedence over the auditory. The player will immediately notice that the room is dark and they need to find a light source before they pour over the contents of a drawer. That is a fixed pattern that they will notice. *The lights are rarely ever on*. What they may not notice though, but will certainly register, is that there is no background music, just the sound of their own footsteps and the storm outside. Like looking for a light source, the player must find useful audio in the slew of multimodal offerings that this house has to gain some sort of bearing on what happened within its walls.

Gone Home attaches the bulk of its notable audio to the objects in its environment. The audio attached to each object can be both diegetic and extradiegetic. Diegetic elements are elements that can be experienced within the gameworld by its character, presumably in real time. The key distinction that Sweet makes is that its function is to "enhance the player's music" (Sweet 8). We see that with the use of the cassette tapes, which let the player listen to the kind of music that Sam and her friend are getting into. While entirely optional to engage with, these cassettes grant an additional window into their lives and even let the player make additional insights and inferences if they choose to read into it.



Figure 1: A cassette tape that can be played at a cassette player conveniently located in Sam's room (Fullbright).

Salen and Zimmerman assert that “action and outcome” must be “*integrated* into the larger context of the game” in order for there to be meaningful play. In *Gone Home*, this is found in the voiced journal entries, which automatically play upon interacting with certain items. These are a mix of diegetic and extra diegetic. The journal entries are sourced to the journal that the player finds to end the game which is a diegetic marker, however the player also hears the entries being read aloud before they have access to it. It would be impossible for Kaitlin to hear them throughout the house, therefore the audio floats above her, only intended for and interpreted by the player (Sweet 8). The player builds their understanding of Sam's situation in finding more of these objects that have attached journal entries, and so these action and outcomes build upon one another, adding to a sense of continuity, so that the first building block is even still useful “at a later point” (35). These objects that dispense audio provide the game's narrative throughline and in providing that essential information, the audio becomes an integrated part of the game's meaningful play.



Figure 2: The player can have a cassette tape playing along with a voiced entry from Sam's Journal (Fullbright).

When asked about the importance of music in video games, Koji Kondo states that “it’s essentially the vehicle for conveying emotion, adds the emotion felt by the game” (*Interview with Video Game Composer Koji Kondo*). In light of this, as alluded to earlier, there is an effect from the game’s absence of extradiegetic music. The experience of navigating an empty house with all its lights out, going from one dark room to another in the middle of a storm with no seeming means of communicating with the outside world and it begins to feel like the setup for a horror game. In that lack of context, the lack of extra-diegetic music is off-putting. The player anticipates something unexpected because they feel distinctly unprepared. The player then craves, and their inclination is to somehow resolve that tension, that void that draws attention to itself.

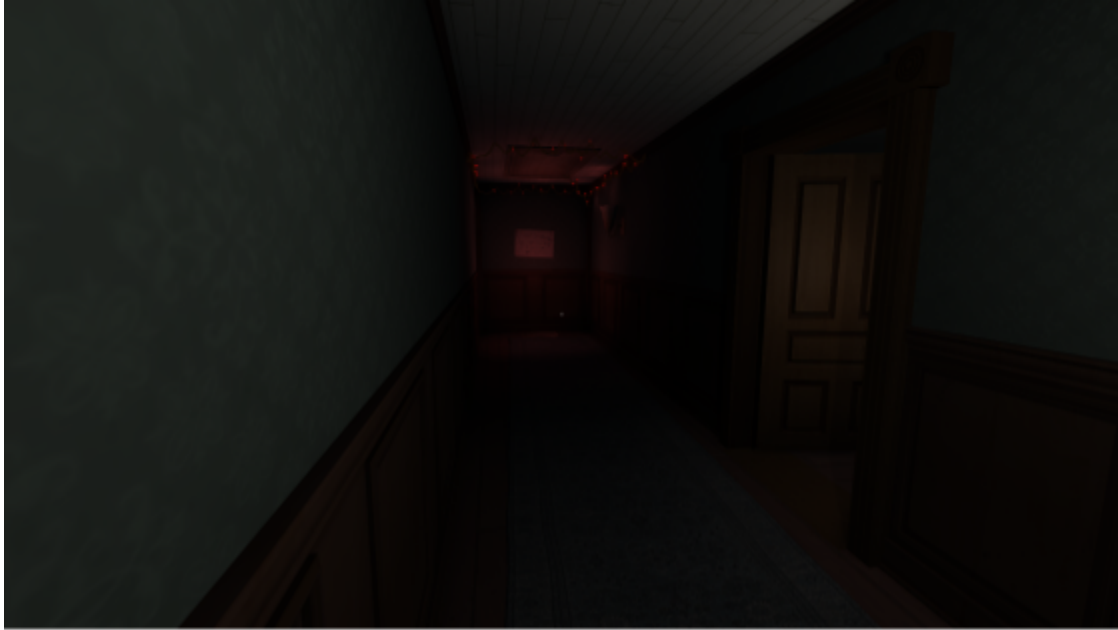


Figure 3: A dark hallway with red light at the end signals fear and foreboding on its own already (Fullbright).

When there's a notable silence, there is the impulse to fill it. On a more fundamental level, finding these notes is additionally reassuring in the auditory realm. That reassurance carries into and adds to the player's association with Sam. In a prime example of digital rhetoric, the player is then more likely to sympathize with Sam's story, as she is the only friendly voice in the entire game through her voiced journal entries, and that voice is a relief as it fills the quiet and supplements the player's roaming.