

NARRATIVE-FOCUSED VIDEO GAMES AS  
SITUATED LEARNING: MEDIA LITERACY  
IMPLICATIONS OF PLAY, IDENTITY,  
AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING

By

SHAWN ROSE

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology  
Oklahoma State University  
Stillwater, Oklahoma  
2004

Master of Arts in Psychology  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, Texas  
2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
July, 2018

NARRATIVE-FOCUSED VIDEO GAMES AS  
SITUATED LEARNING: MEDIA LITERACY  
IMPLICATIONS OF PLAY, IDENTITY,  
AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Pamela Brown

---

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Hongyu Wang

---

Committee Member

Dr. Shanedra Nowell

---

Committee Member

Dr. Bobbi Kay Lewis

---

Outside Committee Member

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None of this would have been possible without my fantastic family. Thank you to my wife, Jacqueline, for supporting me through the long journey of completing this dissertation and for being my sounding board and the reader of everything I have written. (I'm sorry). Thank you to my two wonderful boys, Logan and Henry, for understanding when daddy had to write instead of getting to play. Thank you to my parents, Clark and Christi, and my sister, Krystal, for their never-ending encouragement and support.

I would like to thank Dr. Pam Brown for having the faith to let me to take my unorthodox research idea and run with it. Your insights, perspectives, and patience were invaluable. Thank you for teaching me everything I know about media literacy and for encouraging my creativity throughout my doctoral program. Thank you to the rest of my dissertation committee, Dr. Hongyu Wang, Dr. Shanedra Nowell, and Dr. Bobbi Kay Lewis, for their terrific suggestions and for making this study better than it would have been without them. I would also like to thank Dr. Lu Bailey for introducing me to narrative inquiry and for being an incredible resource during the early formation of this study.

Thank you to my colleagues in the College of Arts and Sciences Student Success Center. I could not ask for a better work family. They cheered me on and did everything they could to help me finish. And finally, thank you to Steve Gaynor and the team at Fullbright for creating the amazing game that is *Gone Home* and their willingness to let me use their work as a core part of this study. I hope the findings of this study will encourage educators that narrative-focused video games can be powerful forms of literature that can help complement existing curriculum.

Name: SHAWN ROSE

Date of Degree: JULY, 2018

Title of Study: NARRATIVE-FOCUSED VIDEO GAMES AS SITUATED  
LEARNING: MEDIA LITERACY IMPLICATIONS OF PLAY, IDENTITY, AND  
PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Major Field: EDUCATION

Abstract: With the emergence of more narrative-focused video games, this study attempted to better understand how college students construct meaning through these interactive experiences as a means of understanding social and cultural differences and perspectives. This study explored how playing narrative-focused video games may interconnect with college students' lived experiences, their understanding of others through perspective taking, and their sense of identity in reality and in-game through the lens of media literacy. The theoretical framework utilized in this study drew from situated learning theory and Gee's theory of identity and identity stories. Data collection for this study used multiple data sources including college student focus groups, gameplay observations of students playing *Gone Home*, and individual participant interviews. Qualitative, narrative analysis was utilized to explore the identity stories shared by five college student participants as well as the themes that emerged across the various data sources. The results of this study found that participants situated video game narratives within their lived experiences, assimilating the experiences within the game with their own stories and reflections. Preliminary evidence emerged that participants engaged in perspective taking tendencies while playing narrative-focused games; however, this finding appears to be connected with the participant's level of awareness and attention to detail while playing the game. This study also explored concepts of the real, virtual, and projective identities (Gee, 2007). Results found that participants utilized video games that tell stories as a vehicle for exploring their own identity as they project themselves into the characters they embody within the game. While participants primarily described their real identity in regard to discursively established identity traits, video games allowed them to explore alternative points of view. Through gameplay observations and the stories participants shared, evidence in support for the media literacy concepts of play and performance emerged, while the media literacies of simulation and negotiation were less prominently featured. Implications for education and future research are also discussed.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
A Brief Introduction to Video Game Narratives .....	2
Definition of Terms .....	3
Statement of Problem .....	6
Curriculum, Learning, and Identity .....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	10
Research Questions .....	12
Significance of the Study .....	13
Positionality Statement .....	17
Conclusion .....	19
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	21
Framing the Concept of Play .....	21
Play Through Constructivism .....	26
Play as Problem Solving .....	28
Video Games as Play .....	30
Video Games in Education: Challenging the Work/Play Dichotomy .....	31
Video Games as Narrative .....	35
Narratology vs Ludology .....	37
Identity Stories in Video Games .....	38
Connecting Emotionally to Video Games .....	41
Social Imagination .....	46
Educational Benefits: Exploration, Engagement, and Empathy .....	48
Moving Away from Violence and Towards Empathy in Video Games .....	53
Promoting Empathy and Perspective Taking .....	56
Video Games and Nonviolence .....	58
Theoretical Framework .....	59
Gee's Identity Theory .....	59
Situated Learning Theory .....	60
Conclusion .....	62
III. METHODOLOGY .....	63
Methodological Foundations .....	63
Participants .....	68
Data Collection .....	69
Data Analysis .....	71
Trustworthiness .....	74

Chapter	Page
Ethical Considerations.....	76
Limitations.....	77
 IV. FINDINGS - IDENTITY STORIES AND CONNECTIONS.....	 79
Research Approach.....	80
About Gone Home.....	83
My Storied Experience of Gone Home: Terry’s Tale.....	86
Personal Connections with Interactive Narratives.....	92
Mariah’s Connection: “The Angst” in the Sternly-Written Letter .....	95
Lauren’s Connection: A Writer Like Me .....	97
Mikey’s Connection: The Affair and Adoption .....	100
Colin’s Connection: The Parents’ Approved Child .....	102
Jeremy’s Connection: The Wolf Among Us .....	105
Identity Stories of the Virtual, Real, and Projective Self.....	110
The Identity Struggle: The Challenge of Describing Our Own Identity .....	112
Lauren’s Identity Story – “Finding Unfamiliar Scenarios in Safe Situations” .....	114
Mariah’s Identity Story – “Take Every Opportunity” .....	116
Mikey’s Identity Story – “I Keep Going Back to Happy” .....	119
Colin’s Identity Story – “Live Life By Its Rules” .....	121
Jeremy’s Identity Story – “That Rock Bottom Moment” .....	123
Jeremy’s Identity Story Part 2 – “Loyalty” .....	126
Playing with a Virtual or Real Identity?.....	128
Projective Identities: Projecting Ourselves into Our Characters .....	133
First Play Identity vs Second Play Identity .....	138
Projection as a Means of Co-Authoring the Story .....	140
Summary.....	145
 V. FINDINGS - EMERGENT THEMES.....	 147
A Notable Trend: “I’d like to say I would have read” .....	148
Coming Out and Seeking Acceptance .....	151
“I’ve known since like, She-Ra” .....	156
The Value of Friendship.....	161
The Social Nature of Games .....	168
Adjusting to Change .....	171
Emotionally Connecting to a Virtual Person.....	174
The Mistaken Suicide.....	184
Feeling a Parent’s Rejection.....	193
Engagement in the Gaming Experience .....	199
Discovery and Mystery .....	199
Interaction and Choice .....	201
Character Relatability.....	205
Playing the Role .....	207
“It’s just a video game” .....	210
Escapism .....	212
Summary.....	214

Chapter	Page
VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	216
Review of Study .....	216
Question 1: Situating Ourselves in the Interactive Narrative .....	218
Question 2: Understanding Diverse Perspectives through a Virtual Lens.....	222
Question 3: Identity Stories of the Virtual, Real, and Projective Self .....	225
Question 4: Applying the Media Literacy Lens .....	229
Play.....	231
Performance .....	232
Simulation .....	234
Negotiation.....	236
Implications for Education .....	238
Implications for Future Research .....	244
Final Reflections.....	247
REFERENCES .....	248
APPENDICES .....	259
Appendix A .....	259
Appendix B.....	260
Appendix C.....	261

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Adapted Gee’s Hybrid Identities and Identity Stories.....	9
Figure 2.1: Character Customization Example .....	40
Figure 2.2: Video Game Moral Dilemma Example .....	44
Figure 2.3: Gee’s Situated Learning Matrix .....	62
Figure 3.1: Gee Transcription Key .....	73
Figure 4.1: A letter of “encouragement” from Terry’s father.....	87
Figure 4.2: Terry’s bulletin board: “You Can Do Better” .....	88
Figure 4.3: The Making Friends book left by Terry to Sam.....	92
Figure 4.4: Sam’s sternly-worded letter to her parents.....	95
Figure 4.5: Janice’s weekly planner.....	101
Figure 4.6: Katie’s belongs stored in the basement. ....	104
Figure 4.7: The Wolf Among Us: Bigby Wolf.....	107
Figure 4.8: The Wolf Among Us: Snow White’s reaction.....	108
Figure 4.9: Personality plaques for Samantha and Kaitlin.....	129
Figure 5.1: PRIVATE! DO NOT READ.....	158
Figure 5.2: Sam as Captain Allegra and Lonnie as the First Mate .....	159
Figure 5.3: The crumpled note in the hall trash.....	162
Figure 5.4: Sora, Donald, and Goofy from Kingdom Hearts.....	165
Figure 5.5: Mourning the “death” of Goofy from Kingdom Hearts II.....	180
Figure 5.6: The bottle of red hair dye by the “bloody” bath tub.....	185
Figure 5.7: “Where we’ll do it” .....	187
Figure 5.8: The final game location: The attic.....	189
Figure 5.9: Max convinces Kate not to jump in Life is Strange .....	192
Figure 5.10: Behind Terry’s bar in Gone Home .....	193
Figure 5.11: Terry’s unsold books boxed away in the closet.....	194
Figure 5.12: The portrait of Terry’s father: Richard Greenbriar.....	196
Figure 5.13: The shrine to Sam and Lonnie.....	202
Figure 5.14: Creating a mess in the Greenbriar foyer.....	203



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: Participant Demographics.....	81
Table 4.2: Journals found and play time for each participant.....	82

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*It was a dark and stormy night, as if it would be any other way. I arrived home from a year abroad and the car from the airport dropped me off at my family's home, except this wasn't the house I grew up in. No, my family had inherited this house from some relative I had never met, nor even heard of. As I pushed open the door to the enclosed front porch desperate to escape the stinging rain, I dropped my bag on the floor. I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye a hurriedly written note on notebook paper taped to the front door. My sister, Samantha, had left me a message. She apologized that she could not be there to see me in person, and that I shouldn't tell mom and dad nor go looking for her. Suddenly concerned, even though her note explicitly told me not to worry, I reached out for the front door. Locked. Where had everyone gone? But if I knew my parents, there had to be a key tucked away somewhere. Glancing around the unfamiliar porch, I scouted for a possible hiding place. I rummaged through a nearby cupboard and was greeted with a random collection of Christmas decorations including our ceramic Christmas goose centerpiece. I really had no idea why we still had this thing. Picking up the goose, I saw the glint of a key hidden underneath. Nervously, I walked to the front door with key in hand as a clap of thunder boomed. Pushing the door open, I slowly entered the dark foyer as the lights flickered in the storm.*

## A Brief Introduction to Video Game Narratives

This is the beginning of my story, but it is not fully my own. In fact, it did not happen directly to me, and yet it did. This is Kaitlin Greenbriar's story, a fictional story, but I experience it through her eyes. I know her thoughts as she uncovers the secrets of what happened to her family, but I am not Kaitlin Greenbriar. I help to guide Kaitlin through this creepy house, but my experience of what unfolds is still my own. I embody Kaitlin, but I don't have her memories or her unique prior experiences. I fill in the gaps with my own. Yet I feel concern, intrigue, and empathy for Kaitlin as well as her family as I learn about them over the course of this two hour video game titled *Gone Home*. James Gee (2011) writes about a hybrid relationship between lived experiences and embodied experiences that occur through the playing of video games. As I journeyed through the empty house in *Gone Home*, those experiences through the eyes of Kaitlin Greenbriar awoke parts of my own identity and lived experience.

Like games such as *Gone Home*, video games have progressively become more narrative-focused since their rise in popularity over 30 years ago. As technology and graphics have become more advanced and complex, the stories that these games formally and informally tell have become equally complex. However, narratives in video games have a long, dare I say, storied past. One of the earliest video games to utilize narrative is the text-based adventure game *Zork*. *Zork* puts the player in the role of an adventurer who stumbles upon a white house in the forest. The game plays out entirely through text with no other graphics. Much like reading a book, the audience must use their imagination to construct the world they are in using the text provided. What separates this from reading a book, however, is that the player has control of what actions the “adventurer” takes in *Zork*. The game presents descriptions of the player’s surroundings through text and then asks the player to type his or her desired actions in the text parser. The game then responds to the player’s typed action by giving new details. For example, the beginning of *Zork* may play out like below:

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.

>open mailbox

Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.

>read leaflet

Of course, the player could have explored the north side of the house and found a window left slightly ajar or could have explored the forest paths surround the house. Players have a choice of what they wish to interact with and explore; yet the game designers have set a specific story with specific obstacles and puzzles that must be overcome. The stories that some video games tell today (not all tell a story) are multimedia experiences. Graphics, environmental sound effects, soundtracks, dialogue between characters, and text found in the game environment such as journal pages or notes are but a few examples of the rich media landscape that video games now create for players. Gee (2007) argues that video games represent a multimodal literacy in which words, images, sounds, and actions each communicate and reflect distinct qualities.

The emergence of Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) have allowed players to play and interact with each other in ways that were previously impossible before the internet was widely available. A great deal of research into the concept of identity and video games has been directed towards these MMO games, particularly role-playing games (MMORPGs). Interestingly, single player narrative-focused games have not received as much attention in regard to exploring potential connections to identity, perspective taking, and empathy. That is what this study hopes to explore. Single player narrative-focused games tend to tell a more cohesive story for the player to experience often focusing on player freedom and choice.

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout this study, reference will be made to a variety of terminology. Many of these terms will be explored further in Chapter 2, but for the sake of clarity, these terms have been operationally defined below:

*Video Games:* McGonigal in *Reality is Broken* (2011) writes about the unique qualities that games possess. Her position helps to situate the importance of video game narratives within the context of education and curriculum studies. McGonigal highlights four broad characteristics of games: 1) goals, 2) rules, 3) systems of immediate feedback, and 4) a voluntary experience. She refers to games as "unnecessary challenges" that the player willingly accepts. This broad definition applies to all types of games, including video games. A video game in the context of this study may represent games played on computers, game consoles, or handheld systems.

*Narrative-focused video games:* Video games are often examined from two differing perspectives: Narratology (story) and ludology (gameplay). In other words, video games are conceptualized as either being focused on story or gameplay. That is not to say that a game with a good story will not have good gameplay or vice versa. Narrative-focused video games will place a higher emphasis on the telling of a cohesive story that this progressed through the gameplay. While Super Mario Bros. tells a story of Mario trying to rescue the princess from Bowser, this does not represent a narrative-focused game. Narrative-focused video games may utilize a variety of narrative techniques, such as environmental storytelling in which a story is told through objects, letters, locations, and other artifacts that are found in the environment, leaving it to the player to connect the dots of the narrative. Narrative-focused video games represent a fairly niche area of the video game market with many of them being created by independent developers (but not always), but the interest in these types of games have grown over time.

*Media literacy:* Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, evaluate, analyze, and create media messages (Schwarz, 2005). The central concepts surrounding media literacy are that media messages are creatively constructed are embedded with specific values and points of view. Additionally, different individuals may experience the same media message in different ways. It is also important in media literacy education to understand that most, but not all, media messages are created for the purpose of gaining profit or power. In context of this study, media literacy will be examined from the concept of new media literacies (Jenkins, 2009). Four of the twelve media

literacies (play, simulation, performance, and negotiation) will be explored in more detail when looking at the purpose of the study later in the chapter.

*Situated learning:* Situated learning is learning that occurs within the context in which it occurs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, learning occurs by doing where the knowledge is applied in the same context in which it is learned. Often this learning may be unintentional, but it is through specific activities, culture, and situations that meaning is constructed. Situated learning often involves social interaction and collaboration in which learning occurs in authentic contexts. As will be explored in Chapter 2, situated learning can be applied to a multitude of contexts, including that of video games.

*Identity:* While a number of perspectives exist in regard to defining identity, this study will utilize Gee's conceptualization. Broadly speaking, identity is "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context," (Gee, 2000). However, Gee conceptualizes four different ways of viewing identity: nature (a state developed forces in nature), institution (a position authorized by authorities within institutions), discourse (an individual trait recognized in the discourse with rational individuals), and affinity (experiences shared in practice of affinity groups) identities. For understanding identities within the context of video games, Gee (2007) writes of virtual, real, and projective identities. Projective identities (also sometimes referred to as hybrid identities) represent the projection of a player's perspectives and values upon a virtual character as well as the player's viewing the development of characters as a project of what the player hopes the character will become through gameplay.

*Play:* Henry Jenkins (2009) argues that new media literacy skills are necessary for students to navigate new and emerging media landscapes. One of the necessary new skills is the concept of "play," which Jenkins defines as "the ability to experiment with the surroundings as a form of problem solving," (p. xiii). While play represents just one of eleven proposed new media literacies, this study attempts to explore the importance of play through the use of video games and how students use the experience of playing interactive narratives to construct meaning within

the context of their own identity and as well as the identities of others. In the context of this study, gamers will by definition play a game, but play from the media literacy perspective suggests that a more active role is taken in which problem solving is a foundation feature.

*Empathy:* Empathy, as defined within the context of this study, is the ability to understand and express the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others. Empathy is believed to represent a critical example of a non-cognitive skill towards becoming a democratic citizen. Empathy is a multidimensional construct consisting of both affective and cognitive aspects (Deutsch & Madle, 1975). Affective empathy relates to the ability for a person to experience the emotional state of others, while cognitive empathy pertains to a person's ability to mentally understand the emotional state or perspective of someone else.

### **Statement of Problem**

While certainly not all students play video games, Pew Internet Research (2003) found that 70% of college students played video games at least once in a while. Exposure to this form of media has steadily grown over the years, but at the same time the development of deep, complex storytelling has also emerged in the field. While video games provide rich opportunities and curriculum implications in regard to storytelling and player agency, research has not adequately examined how college students experience video game narratives, which serves as a hidden form of curriculum. Though research has found support that video game can be meaningful entertainment experiences (Oliver, Bowman, Wooley, Rogers, Sherrick, & Chung, 2015), this study intends to look at the educational implications that meaningful video game experiences can create. Like any form of media, values are embedded within these messages.

With the growth in the availability of narrative-focused video games as well as the continued rise in student engagement with video games in general, it becomes important to develop a clearer understanding of how students situate video game narratives into their own formulations of identity. A number of studies have examined the potentially negative impact that violence in video games can have upon youth, but the potentially beneficial aspects of video

games largely get overshadowed. One of the most promising aspects of narrative-focused video games is the potential for the player to take on alternative perspectives different from their own. The ability to “walk in someone else’s shoes” virtually and to embody another person suggests that the development of empathy may be at play. A meta-analysis study examining college student empathy from 1979 to 2009 revealed that college students today are about 40 percent lower on measures of empathy than students 10 to 30 years ago (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Interestingly, the increased exposure to media is suggested as one of the potential reasons for the decrease in empathy over time. In particular, the study found that decreases in empathic concern and perspective taking were the most pronounced.

Therefore, developing a better understanding of student constructions of meaning when engaging in video games narratives should be explored further. However, this study will be looking specifically at issues of perspective taking as it relates to player interactions within video game narratives.

### **Curriculum, Learning, and Identity**

At the core of this study is Gee’s perspective that engagement in video game narratives may have implications for empathy and identity formation. Gee (2011) contends that narratives frequently serve as a means of making sense of the world. Using the metaphor of life as a game, Gee argues that stories help us to take stock of the hand we have been dealt and in turn we construct what he calls an “identity story.” He describes these stories as “the story about who we are in the face of what we have been given and what we have made of it,” (p. 354). Additionally, often our identity story positions ourselves as an agent of change and control. Video game narratives frequently provide players with unique opportunities to “play the hands other people were dealt” and by extension allow players to construct new identity stories that move beyond their own. The difference between video games and other narrative mediums is the ability for the audience to make decisions and actions that have consequences within the context of the game world. While the game itself likely (not always) has a set narrative to tell, following a set



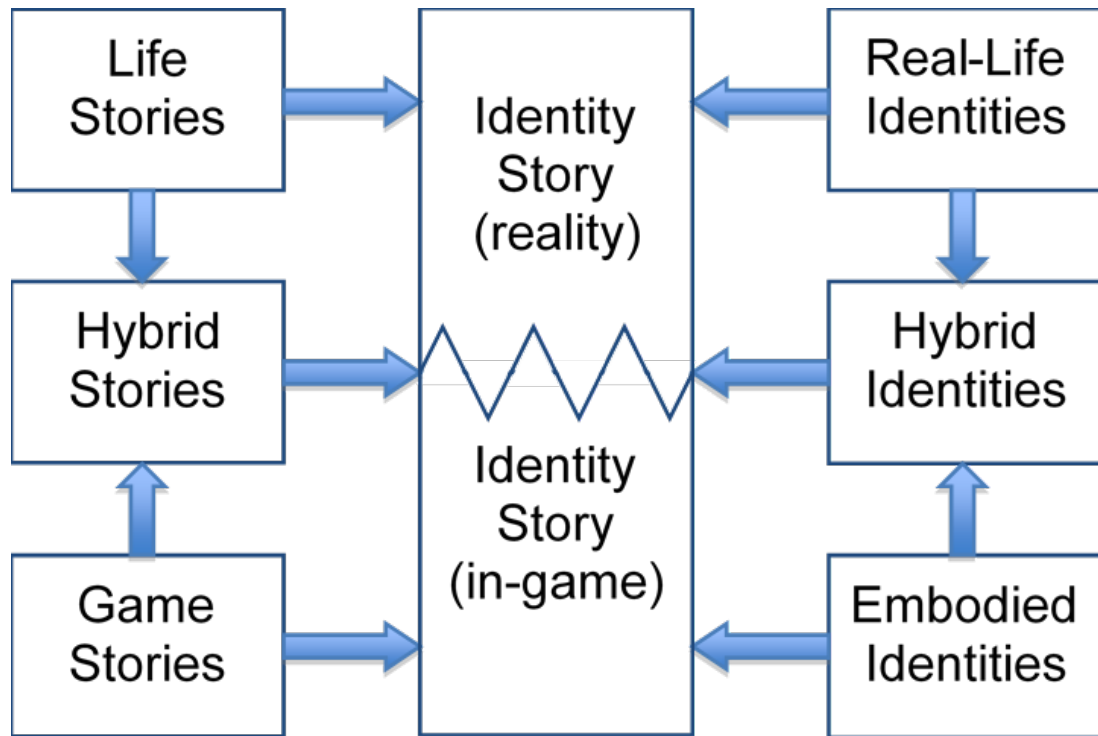
narrative path that ultimately leads to the same destination, the game presents players with rich opportunities to construct stories of who their character is and who this person will become over the course of the game.

Cassidy (2011) notes the unique interactive aspect of video games that other mediums of narrative lack. Video game narratives are largely fixed, scripted stories that play out in response to player actions. However, Cassidy suggests that this interactivity in video games inaccurately implies that a game's narrative is not fixed. While I recognize Cassidy's argument given that the narrative has been programmed into the game, even its branching alternative paths, I believe this does not completely capture the full picture of the interaction between ludic and narrative aspects of video games. Yet players and the stories they construct through these games are positioned partly in the context of an actual person dealing with challenges within the game as well as how the player embodies him- or herself within the character they play as. Just as Gee (2011) views game players and stories with video games as odd hybrids, this essentially alludes to the idea of a dual meaning making process that occurs through video games. On one hand, a player may construct meaning by playing a particular character or avatar, but simultaneously the player may position the game narrative within his or her own lived experience.

Curriculum within the context of this study takes a broader conceptualization of the construct. William Pinar (2012) contends that curriculum theory is the interdisciplinary study of educational experience. These educational experiences may take place inside or even outside of schools. Curriculum therefore incorporates philosophical, historical, social, psychological, political, economic, culturally, and institutional influences. Instead of conceptualizing curriculum as the sequence and scope of academic knowledge to be learned, this study is interested in the curriculum that is both planned and unplanned. Curriculum is conceptualized here as a wide spread web of constructs and factors involved in the process of learning and education. Henry Giroux (2000) notes that one of the unifying features of education in the United States is to provide students the "critical capacities, knowledge, and values that enable them to become active

citizens striving to build a stronger democratic society,” (p. 83). If curriculum in part should prepare students to become active democratic citizens, I argue that the ability to take on the perspectives of others and the fostering of empathy are important if not central factors within that equation. However, as will be explored

Figure 1.1 below serves as a visual representation of one of the perspectives being utilized in this study to understand the concept of identities and identity stories according to Gee. All of this takes place within the broader context of curriculum, especially in regard to the hidden curriculum, the unplanned or unintended values and perspectives learned in the process, which exists within video games themselves.



**Figure 1.1** – An adapted representation of Gee’s (2007, 2008, 2011) concept of hybrid identities and identity stories.

This visual representation of Gee’s framework represents how stories and identities in reality interact to form his concept of an identity story. However, at the same time the player will embody the identity of the character played in the game while taking part in the game’s story.

This embodied identity and game story will in turn form an in-game identity story about who the character is in the context of the situation he or she is found. Yet as Gee notes, the player is not simply the character played in the game. Players bring with them their own stories and identities into the game world. The interaction of stories and identities through play will form what Gee (2007, 2008, 2011) refers to as hybrids (or projective identities), a combination of in-game and reality identities as well as stories from our own lives that influence the way we perceive and interpret the story within the game. These hybrids in turn contribute towards identity stories, which could potentially inform our own identity story in real life.

The central concept at the heart of this study is the powerful construct of the story. One of the core assumptions of this study is that stories are means of shaping the world and those stories can aid in revealing truths about human experiences (Riessman, 2008). Though stories can take on a variety of roles, the ability for stories to move others into action, towards social change is central to the theoretical framework of this study. Gee (2011) suggests that the interaction between the hybrid stories and identities potentially formed through the thoughtful playing of narrative-focused video games can inform a player's identity story in real life. This also provides a theoretical opportunity for the player to construct meaning in regard to who he or she might be from a different perspective or even who they should be in his or her own lives (Gee, 2011). Not only can players potentially learn more about themselves but the opportunity also exists for developing empathic understanding of others through embodying virtual identities and seeing the world from a different perspective.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study in a broad sense is to develop a better understanding of how college students construct meaning from interactive video game narratives. More specifically, this study explores how those constructions of meaning may be situated with students' lived experiences, their perceptions of identity, and their empathic understanding of others through perspective taking. These findings will be examined in the context of media literacies for using

video games a means of teaching issues of social justice and better understand different perspectives. Compared to other storytelling mediums such as books and movies, video games represent a relatively young form of media especially in regard to the integration of stronger narrative structures within these games. With the emergence of more narrative-focused video games, this leaves a great deal that we do not yet understand about how we construct meaning through these interactive experiences. Video games represent a unique form of storytelling that involves audience participation, often with player making choices that carry consequences that can affect gameplay and even how the story unfolds. Few studies have attempted to qualitatively understand the meaning making process of the audience within narrative-focused video games. While other storytelling mediums have the ability to evoke emotional responses from the audience, the interactive nature of video games have the audience (the player) take an active role, which could result in a broader spectrum of emotional response such as guilt and pride (Isbister, 2016). Gee (2010) and Jenkins (2009) argue that video games often, at their core, allow players to engage in unique forms of problem solving. From a media literacy perspective, understanding gaming literacies is something that needs to be further developed. Jenkins' (2010) media literacy concept of play certainly has a place when examining the broader implications of video games and the potential benefits that could provide. By understanding the meaning making process in response to these interactive stories, this opens upon dialogue about potential beneficial applications of narrative-focused video games as educational tools for understanding social and cultural differences and inequalities.

In addition, Gee (2011) explores the relationship between the player and the narratives they experience. Working from the concept that stories are used as a means of making sense of our experiences, this study wants to examine the ways in which students may embody the virtual characters or avatars they play. Using Gee's concept of the identity story, this study intends to explore the ways in which students may utilize video games with its interplay of gameplay and narrative to take on alternative perspectives. Because the player plays as virtual character in a

game world with its own structure and rules this potentially creates a unique intersection of real-life, virtual, and projective identities (Gee, 2007). The potential exists for players to carry their lived experiences, motivations, and identities into the game as they also embody the identities of another person with his or her own past, motivations, and identity. Exploring narrative-focused video games as a means of perspective taking allows for the development of better understanding of how this role-taking in video games to could be related to empathy, identity formation, and learning.

Media literacy is the educational focus within this study. Media literacy broadly refers to an individual's ability to access, evaluate, analyze, and create media messages. Jenkins (2009) provides one direct application for video games in education through his conceptualization of new media literacies. Specifically, the media literacies of play, simulation, performance, negotiation all have connections to the educational implications that narrative-focused video games might provide. Play is the ability to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving. Simulation is the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. Performance is the ability to taken on alternative identities for the purpose of improvising and discovering. Negotiation is the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. Narrative-focused video games could serve as a direct application of media literacy concepts that could potentially have educational implications.

### **Research Questions**

This study intends to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How do college students situate their own lived experiences, stories, and identity within narrative-focused video game narratives?
- 2) How does playing narrative-focused video games contribute towards a student's understanding others through perspective taking?

- 3) How does playing narrative-focused video games inform a student's concept of personal identity in comparison to their adopted in-game identity?
- 4) How do student experiences with video game narratives relate to the media literacies of play, performance, simulation, and negotiation?

### **Significance of the Study**

We live in an increasingly mediated society. One such form of media that has grown significantly over the last 30 years is that of video games. When discussing the importance of video games within the context of learning and education, scholars need to recognize video games as a new form of literacy (Gee, 2007). Furthermore, Gee argues that video games represent a multimodal literacy in which words, images, sounds, and actions each communicate and reflect distinct qualities. Within the realm of education, arguably the current system within the United States tends to favor extrinsic motivators, for example, the heightened emphasis on grades and standardized test scores. Yet intrinsic motivators have traditionally been found to be greater influences upon learning, and the act of playing video games often carries intrinsic rewards given that games can be conceptualized as unnecessary challenges (McGonigal, 2011). Video games represent a unique medium that tells interactive stories, often driven by player choice. It provides players with a sense of agency that is difficult to find in any other form of media. That's not to say that video games do not utilize extrinsic motivation to move the game forward because they absolutely do.

Relating specifically to the ideas associated with developing media literacy in children, Giroux (2000) suggests that, "The new media, including the Internet and computer culture, need to become serious objects of educational analysis and learning. . . [and] must be legitimated and incorporated into the school curricula as seriously as the study of history, English, and language arts," (p. 30). Giroux also argues that children as well as adults should be taught how to critically read and evaluate popular culture. Specifically, he notes that it is of great importance that we learn how to be producers of culture by utilizing technology, which allows us to create text that

engages our own experiences and personal traditions. Henry Jenkins (as cited in Giroux, 2000) suggests that schools need to reconsider how media fits into the learning process. Specifically, Jenkins notes that students need to be given the opportunity to form communities based upon their interests in digital media in much the same way as media literacy and the production of media need to be central facets of the educational system, which he refers to as participatory cultures.

Taking these dramatic changes to how media is not only consumed but also created online provides a compelling backdrop for conceptualizing the importance of media literacy education and the understanding of participatory cultures that emerge within these media landscapes. These media landscapes serve as metaphorical playgrounds for learning and engagement, yet they also serve as an intriguing means by which students can share and construct meaning through these cultures. Players have the ability share their thoughts and perspectives through these participatory cultures online.

The issue of authorship represents one of the central questions that often emerge within media literacy education (Hobbs, 2011). Interactive narratives found in some varieties of video games provide players with unique opportunities of co-authorship. Games that provide meaningful choices to the player allow the audience to shape the tone and direction that the narrative takes. Even though the developers of the game have programmed these choices and the subsequent consequences, the player's choices can potentially influence which parts of the story unfold. Good versus bad dichotomies are the most prevalent system in which video games such as *Bioshock*, *Mass Effect*, *Infamous*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* operate. Often these choices will manifest through moral choices that the player must make. Not all games create a strict dichotomy of good versus bad however. Games developed by TellTale Games, especially *The Walking Dead* series, provide players with more nuanced choices though still through dichotomous choices. For instance, choosing which of two different lives you are willing to save or which few members of your starving camp will you give your limited rations to. Other games

such as *Heavy Rain* (developed by Quantic Dream) allow the player to take on a much stronger role in the co-authorship of the story. In *Heavy Rain*, the player takes charge of four different characters throughout the game's narrative. The choices players make will have direct consequences upon these characters' lives. In fact, even if one of these characters dies in some way, the narrative continues taking into account that loss.

According to McGonigal (2011), players often have high levels of intrinsic motivation while playing a game and also demonstrate high levels of persistence when faced with failure. This contrasts dramatically with many educational settings in which the opposite can be seen (extrinsic motivators and difficulty overcoming failure). As Sir Ken Robinson (2011) argues, making mistakes is something that is often discouraged in formal education. Yet, while playing video games, players actively learn from their mistakes and often persist against insurmountable odds. McGonigal (2011) also presents some preliminary support that some video games may be beneficial in the development of empathy.

Many interactive narratives such as video games provide players with the opportunity to experience the world from an alternative perspective. Therefore, I contend that certain types of video games may be well equipped to help students develop their own empathetic skills that that could lead to an increased awareness of social injustices. According to Greene (1995) the concept of plurality implies that, as humans, we are all the same yet still distinctly unique because no one else has lived life the same way or had the same experiences. Greene suggests that everyone's story is worth telling. In particular, the value of engaging in social imagination allows absent voices to be heard that would otherwise not.

Maxine Greene's idea of releasing our imagination to view alternative perspectives and possibilities is largely an experiential phenomenon. Just as Dewey (1910) suggests that students learn by what they do, this study aimed to engage students through the use of narrative-focused video games as a vehicle of seeing things as they could be otherwise. Greene (2001) discusses what she calls phases of imaginative awareness. This alludes to the concept of engagement where



we fully immerse ourselves in the experience. In turn, this engagement can ultimately open us up to alternative perspectives, alternate ways of viewing the world and the injustices that exist within it.

Unfortunately, a trend of misogynistic thinking has largely dominated gamer culture. For example, in late 2014, an online movement that became known as GamerGate allegedly began to confront what many viewed as a problem of ethics in video game journalism. However, it became a vehicle for attacking women in the video game industry, especially those who attempted to bring awareness to the recurring stereotypes of female characters as depicted in video games. Anita Sarkeesian “became the target of vicious, misogynist harassment that includes death and rape threats, pornographic vandalism of her Wikipedia page... All of this because she wanted to have a conversation about the way women are portrayed in video games,” (Wheaton, 2015). Yet other video game critics and developers such as Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn have become victims of this troubling movement as well. Even browsing the comments section of many gaming websites, when someone attempts to bring up an issue of social injustice in video games, they are frequently met with the label of SJW, or Social Justice Warrior, as something derogatory. Challenging the gamer culture or identity in any way is often viewed as a threat regardless of the merits of the criticism. However, I believe this demonstrates the importance of developing the ability to view the world from multiple, alternative perspectives. While video game culture has by and large perpetuated these issues of misogyny in mainstream video games, the rapid growth of the indie game development has allowed for this same medium to begin addressing more serious themes of diversity, equity, and compassion. Therefore, developing a better understanding of student constructions of meaning when engaging in video games narratives should be explored further. However, this study will be looking specifically at issues of perspective taking as it relates to player interactions within video game narratives. This has direct applications to multicultural education and exploring issues of diversity and equity. Banks (2008) notes that multicultural education can occur at a variety of different levels but challenging students to

embrace diverse and multiple perspectives and voices provides the first stepping stone for promoting increased awareness through action and change. Video games that emphasize compelling stories often provide players with the opportunity to take on the role or perspective of someone else.

If part of the purpose of education is to help develop active democratic citizens, understanding the external influences upon student formation of identity and their understanding of world around them is of vital importance. If video games can aid in the process of helping students to take on the perspectives of others in ways that help the student to develop empathic understanding, then it serves us well to fully explore these potential avenues. This has direct implications for the use video games that narratively address serious issues as a supplemental educational experiences for learning about issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. Learning how college students may situate these virtual experiences with interactive narratives in video games may provide educators with greater insights into how to best leverage this unique medium both inside and outside the classroom.

### **Positionality Statement**

It is important to address what brought me to this particular research topic and how I position myself within the study. I grew up playing video games back in the mid-1980's with the Nintendo Entertainment System and have played games ever since. Video games were a significant part of my childhood, and as I grew older, they became my preferred medium for story telling because I, as the player, was involved in its telling. I did not have a personal computer in my house until my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, but this opened up a whole new world of games. I remember begging my dad in Walmart to get this game that had the most photorealistic graphics I had ever seen. The game was called *Myst*, and it is no exaggeration that *Myst* completely changed how I looked at video games. I became completely obsessed (my wife would say I still am, and she's right). *Myst* is played from the first person perspective exploring a mysterious island, solving elaborate puzzles to find linking books that would transport me to other fantastic worlds (called

Ages). In the library on this island, I discovered a shelf containing books that had mostly been burned but a few of these books contained journals that described the experiences of Atrus, the writer of those linking books. I scoured every one of them noting little details that ultimately fleshed out the game's backstory. I began to better understand the game's world and its subtlety by paying attention to the details in the environment. My copy of the game came with a physical blank journal. Having never played a game like this, I began journaling about my experiences, jotting down clues, and putting my thoughts and theories to paper. I still have that journal to this day, and it provides an interesting look back at my 8<sup>th</sup> grade self. This was an entirely new experience. Instead of smashing Goombas or fighting enemies with the Master Sword, my task was to explore, discover, and solve the puzzles that I found along the way. This was my first exposure to the adventure game genre as well as to games that used the environment as a means of communicating aspects of the game's story and world.

As games have become for sophisticated, they have begun to tell more mature and complex stories. This has appealed to me because it allows me to view situations from the perspectives of others. The concept of empathy has interested me for years, and as an undergraduate studying psychology, I conducted research on the concept of emotional contagion (I briefly discuss this in more detail in later chapters). My research in my Master's program also focused on emotions as I researched cognitive distortions and how this related to depressive symptomology in a clinical child sample. Therefore, my interest in understanding how video games may help us to take on the perspectives of others as a precursor of empathy seems a natural progression of my research interests. My position is that I believe certain video games can serve as a powerful educational tools that can provide us with opportunities to temporarily view the world from alternative perspectives.

I selected *Gone Home* as the video game to be used in this study for many reasons but primarily because it told a personal and intimate story that I believed could resonate emotionally with the player. I personally made connections to the game, its time period, and its characters. I

saw my uncle when I played *Gone Home*. I made connections to the characters through my own experiences and perspectives. My uncle Ray had a significant impact on me growing up as he encouraged creativity, imagination, and playfulness. He was an artist in every sense of the word and loved a good story. Ray had been working on a story about little pumpkin creatures that were brought to life through magic. He had the beginning of the story written but then asked me to tell the story of what happened next. I remember sitting at his dining room table making up a preposterous tale that in no way would have fit into the universe he had created (I am fairly certain that I had a character who had a wrist watch that could be used change the world around him). He listened to every word, asking me questions, never once telling me that my story had meandered in directions that made little to no sense. He embraced the wonder of a child and listened to my story with attention, interest, and laughter. As I grew older, I also learned that my uncle was gay, and I developed a greater understanding and respect for this community that was perhaps atypical growing up in a conservative state during the 1990's. He would occasionally share stories from his childhood when he realized that he was attracted to other men and that he had even tried dating girls but something never felt right to him. His own parents, frankly, did not take the news well and their relationship suffered as a result. I saw my uncle in the character of Sam Greenbriar. I brought all of this with me when I played *Gone Home* for the first time. I began to wonder, what else will players bring with them when they play a video game?

### **Conclusion**

Curriculum studies is interested in learning that occurs inside and outside the classroom. This chapter proposes that narrative-focused video games carry their own unique hidden curricula that potentially provide players with opportunities to take on the perspective of another person or persons. Video games that explore complex, human issues could potentially set the stage for exploring issues of social justice, diversity, and multiculturalism. However, better understanding how college students situate these video game narratives and ultimately construct meaning

regarding their own identity serves as intriguing exploration of how to best utilize this unique story-telling medium and its implication for student learning.

In the next chapter, the literature of play and how video games represent unique functions of both play and narrative are reviewed. Looking at play through the lens of constructivism and as a form of problem solving sets the stage for exploring the educational benefits associated with the playing of certain types of video games with strong supporting narratives. The theoretical framework for this study will also be discussed as it related to situated learning and identity.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Framing the Concept of Play**

As noted in Chapter 1, this study will be utilizing Henry Jenkins' (2009) concept of play as a new media literacy skill defined as the ability for a person to experiment with one's surroundings as a function of problem solving. This ability to explore and experiment serves as a necessary skill in order for students to effectively navigate new and emerging media landscapes. For Jenkins, play within a media landscape is one important component of being an engaged participant in what he calls participatory cultures. While this study does not intend to explore the concept of participatory cultures specifically, it does provide a compelling backdrop for conceptualizing the importance of play in education and learning from a media literacy perspective. This media literacy definition of play that Jenkins provides serves as the foundation for the relevance of video games in education, but it is still important to examine the broader concept of play as it traditionally relates to video games.

When we examine the role of video games, or even games in general, the concept of play will emerge as a central theme. To fully conceptualize my argument of the importance of video games, we must first conceptualize the concept of play from multiple perspectives. "If you look at what produces learning and memory and well-being, play is as fundamental as any other aspect of life, including sleep and dreams," notes Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, in a New York Times article on play (Henig, 2008, p. 40). Yet for some, play may be viewed as a

frivolous activity reserved for children and more of a waste of time for adults (e.g. Henig, 2008). Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) note that video games as a form of play have especially been criticized for its perceived lack of benefits or the negative impact it can have on children in the majority of psychological research (typically citing violence in video games as a negative factor). From this perspective, play, and by extension video games, simply is not something to be taken seriously. This problem is perpetuated by how society typically defines play. Even a Google definition search suggests that play is engaging in an “activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.” However, this does not present a complete perspective on the phenomenon of play. Some have argued that the reason for this perception of play is that people simply have difficulty understanding what play really is. Play is a vital part of human development and learning according to the National Institute for Play (2009), which was established in 1996 to help promote scientific research about the transformative power of play. In order to fully explore the role of play in media literacy, understanding the theoretical basis of play is essential. Numerous theories regarding the nature of play have emerged over time but often provide a limited or incomplete conceptualization of play. Herbert Spencer formally established one of the earliest theories of play in 1875 (although the concept was originally coined by Friedrich von Schiller in 1873). The Surplus Energy theory of play suggests a release of excess energy remaining after their primary needs had been met (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). While this perspective on play frequently endures in schools and in homes (i.e. let the kids play a little longer to get all of their energy out), it provides a severely limited view of play.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), in his aptly named book *The Ambiguity of Play*, discusses the difficulty of conceptualizing a universal definition of play. By delving into the theories and classifications of play, many of Sutton-Smith’s critiques regarding our understanding of play become abundantly clear. Much of the research on play has focused almost exclusively upon the role of play in childhood, with few studies looking explicitly at the importance of play beyond important developmental milestones. In *Play, Dreams & Imitation in Childhood*, Piaget (1962)

even notes the complexities of conceptualizing the phenomenon of play. Attempting to compile an inclusive list of all types of play presents a challenge in and of itself given the multitude of terminologies used. Some of these views of play overlap while others plainly contradict. For the purposes of exploring the underlying principles and perspectives that guide Jenkins' (2009) conceptualization of play as one of the new media literacies, it is important to at least explore some of the more prominent theories regarding play in hopes of providing at least a preliminary foundation for understanding play within the context of media literacy.

One of the classic classifications of play came from Mildred Parten (as cited in Casper & Theilhelmer, 2010; Feldman, 2000; Xu, 2010). Even though Parten developed her classification of play in 1932, her work on play is generally still considered as one of the most comprehensive descriptions of children's social play (Xu, 2010). Parten described the social development of children occurring at three different levels which include non-social activity, parallel play, and social interaction and six types of play that occur within those three levels (Feldman, 2000; Xu, 2010). While Parten's hierarchy pertains mainly to children, the distinction between social and non-social forms of play helps to inform discourse regarding play. However, there have been several cultural and social changes that have occurred since Parten's hierarchy was established. Xu (2010) notes that we do not necessarily play less today, but we do play differently. In particular a change in how games are played, especially video games, brings into question whether play is more complex than originally conceptualized by Parten. Though single player video games may at first be conceptualized as a non-social form of play, this does not fully encapsulate the complexity of video gameplay.

Piaget (1962) argued that learning (cognitive development) involved both assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation and accommodation refer to the processes by which a person attempts to understand their experiences (Piaget, 1954; Feldman, 2000). Assimilation occurs when an experience is conceptualized within one's existing schema or view of the world. Accommodation occurs when our way of thinking is changed in order to make sense of the new



experience. He theorized that play was not the same as learning because play only involved the process of assimilation but without accommodation. Piaget suggested that during play, we assimilate reality to our interests. Research in grounded cognition theory suggests certain media techniques can produce emotional reactions because we cognitively compare our experiences from moment to moment to our previous experiences whether they occur in reality or through some mediated format (Isbister, 2016). Our brains in turn draw up emotional and cognitive responses that are based upon (or grounded in) our own experiences. This implies that we are capable of assimilating mediated experiences to our previous experiences in a way that can trigger emotions and cognitions. However, Isbister argues that by willfully engaging in alternate situations and experiences about being human through video games can in turn inform our own experiences of what it means to be human. In other words, it suggests that video games as a form of play could potentially lead to the accommodation of new experiences into our view of the world.

Within the context of his stages of cognitive development, Piaget described three types of play: Sensory-motor (practice) play, symbolic play, and games with rules. Sensory-motor play (also sometimes called functional play) largely exists within the context of Piaget's sensorimotor stage of development and is highlighted by repetitive movements and understanding the world through the senses. Symbolic play, which tends to emerge within the pre-operational stage of development, entails engaging in make-believe and role-playing. Objects are typically used to symbolize other things beyond their intended use. Games with rules represents a more sophisticated type of play in which rules are imposed to provide play with more structure. Within the context of games with rules, these "rules necessarily imply social or inter-individual relationships," (Piaget, 1962, p. 112). It is important to note that these types of play are not mutually exclusive as many features of symbolic and sensory-motor play take place within the context of games with rules.

Piaget (1962) also outlines several criteria commonly utilized for understanding play: 1) play is not a behavior, per se, but rather an orientation of the behavior, an interest, 2) play is spontaneous, 3) play is an activity of pleasure, 4) play often has a general lack of organization, 5) play is generally free from conflicts, and 6) play can be characterized by “overmotivation”, or additional incentives that promote play. Piaget (1962) notes, “the tonality of an activity is ludic [possessing qualities related to play] in proportion as it has a certain orientation,” (p. 150). In other words, this suggests that an activity could feasibly take on the characteristics of play given the right tone and orientation towards the task. Obviously Piaget did not write about video games within the context of his conceptualization of play, as this form of play did not begin to emerge until the last decade of his life. However, video games represent a unique form of play that provides experiences that are distinct from other forms of play, which will be touched on later.

By establishing even this limited collection of ways to conceptualize play, it emphasizes Sutton-Smith’s (1997) argument regarding the ambiguities associated with play. However, this at least provides a good starting point for exploring the role of play in media literacy and in the context of video games. Moreover, more recent conceptualizations of play have tried to address the concerns regarding some of the classical theories of play not taking into consideration changes in culture and society (see Xu, 2010). A more contemporary view comes from The National Institute for Play (2009) that proposes that seven patterns of play have emerged through scientific literature (an extensive reference list is provided on their website of studies that support these designated patterns). These patterns of play consist of the following: Attunement Play, Body Play & Movement, Object Play, Social Play, Imaginative and Pretend Play, Storytelling-Narrative Play, and Creative Play (also referred to as Transformative Play). Creative play and storytelling-narrative play are two patterns of play that are of particular interest within the context of this study. Creative play involves using our imagination and creativity to transcend what we already know in our day-to-day lives to generate new ideas, which in part is an integration of other forms of play. Jenkins (2009) suggests that “the ability to understand the power of images

and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media...” are essential skills for students to develop (p. 28). While media literacy has emphasized the ability to access, evaluate, and analyze media messages, another important part of the media literacy equation is the ability to create media messages (Schwarz, 2005). Obviously, storytelling-narrative play has direct applications as well given that the science behind this pattern of play focus primarily on how stories help in making meaning of the world. This form of play also features the ability for participants to experience “vicarious involvement” and can enrich our own personal narratives (National Institute for Play, 2009).

Unfortunately, even this more contemporary conceptualization of play seems to not fully encapsulate all of the variety and nuances of play. Regardless, these seven patterns of play do provide us with terminology for play not explicitly addressed in classical conceptions.

Additionally, they will serve as a backdrop for understanding the importance of video game play in regards to media literacy education according to Jenkins (2009) and Gee (2010).

### *Play Through Constructivism*

At the heart of many of Jenkins’ positions is the underlying principle of constructivism. At its most basic level, constructivism contends that people actually construct their understanding of reality (Oxford, 1997). By examining Jenkins’s perspective on play within the context of media literacy, the influence of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey becomes evident. All of these thinkers (by and large) are considered constructivists, which further suggests that constructivism greatly informed the work of Jenkins and concept of play.

Jenkins (2009) suggests that new media literacies should be conceptualized as social skills as a means of interacting within a larger community as opposed to just individualized expression. It is this experience as a part of community that is vital for education. Dewey (1938) notes that the quality of an experience is paramount by which one constructs their understanding. When considering the use of any activity, whether it be play or the use of a game in teaching, care must be taken. Dewey writes, “Overemphasis upon activity as an end, instead of upon *intelligent*

activity, leads to identification of freedom with immediate execution of impulses and desires,” (p. 69). Additionally, he cautions against confusing these impulses with automatically warranting purpose.

Piaget (1962) viewed play as an important means by which children construct new knowledge through active exploration of the environment and the association with one’s own past experiences; he also valued the role of social play in the child’s social and emotional development. According to Piaget, engaging in play helps to move children away from an egocentric view of the world through their interactions with other children (Feldman, 2000). This largely occurs by requiring children to consider the perspectives of their playmates (Xu, 2010). From a constructivism perspective, the ability to take on the perspectives of others allows us to construct and adapt knowledge and our understanding of the world. One could argue that in some forms of play there is the potential for the development of mutual respect and empathy. Many video games provide players with opportunities to take the perspective of the avatar they play or even develop understanding with a non-player character (NPC). Media literacy also challenges people as consumers and producers of media to consider alternative perspectives. This could imply that play, within the context of media literacy, could effectively help foster this perspective taking as well. It would generally seem that play can potentially help both children and adults to face the ever changing world we live in.

The play-as-preparation hypothesis is one popular theory to explain the phenomenon of play (Henig, 2008). This theory proposes that play evolved from a need to prepare for adulthood, which in part occurs through the imitation or mimicking of more adult actions. Both Gee (2008c) and Jenkins (2009) write about play from the play-as-preparation context. According to Dewey (1910), play is a subconscious activity that helps an individual develop both mentally and socially. Dewey suggests that play intends to help children grow into a working world. Vygotsky (1978) mirrors this point by stating, “In their play children project themselves into the adult activities of their culture and rehearse their future roles and values,” (p. 129). Dewey further

suggests that as children become adults, engagement in traditional children's play decreases while adult play becomes more of a means for amusement away from work. Illustrating how Jenkins (2009) accentuates the play-as-preparation hypothesis, he writes, "Today's children learn through play the skills they will apply to more serious tasks later. The challenge is how to connect decisions made in the context of our everyday lives with the decision made at local, state, and national levels," (Jenkins, 2009, p. 13).

### *Play as Problem Solving*

Schools largely focus on preparing students to be independent problem solvers, yet once they enter the workforce the need for collaboration and working as a team member becomes increasingly more important (Jenkins, 2009). Considering that play, in part, involves experimenting within our surroundings as a means of problem solving, developing a sense of play within education needs to certainly be emphasized (cooperative play in particular). While Piaget (1954) focused primarily upon a child's ability to construct reality independently, Vygotsky (1978) had a greater interest in how reality is constructed through social interaction. Jenkins (2009) suggests that play should serve as a means of exploring and processing knowledge through problem solving as a part of a community, which could ultimately prepare children for the responsibilities and roles they will eventually take on as adults.

A commonly held facet of play is that it is fun. While this is often times certainly the case, playing does not necessarily mean it is a fun activity all the time. Jenkins (2009) explores this notion of play as fun vs. engagement, and suggests that play is truly more about engagement than anything else. Vygotsky (1967) also challenges this notion of defining play as fun or pleasure. As an example he notes that a child playing a game may not find the activity enjoyable or fun if it he or she does not find the activity interesting. Unlike Piaget (1962), who considered pleasure as a defining criterion of play behaviors, Vygotsky suggests that pleasure should not act as a defining characteristic. Instead, Vygotsky proposes that a defining characteristic of play is

that it creates an imaginary situation. For Jenkins, play within the context of media literacy education is one of engagement as opposed to one of fun. Although fun may be a by-product of play, it does not represent the core benefit of incorporating play into education.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive development focused on the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). "[ZPD] is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers," (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Social interaction serves as a vital part of cognitive development according to Vygotsky. The metaphor of scaffolding is commonly associated with the ideas of Vygotsky, although Vygotsky did not use the term himself (Xu, 2010). In essence, a teacher or even a more knowledgeable peer can scale, or scaffold, the amount of assistance a person receives within his or her ZPD as needed. In turn, learning occurs through this social interaction. This process intends to empower students and helps them to become more self-directed (Oxford, 1997). Video games in particular will often utilize this scaffolding concept into the game design, providing more assistance and guidance early in the game but scale back as the player develops competency with the gameplay. From Vygotsky's perspective, many of the most significant developmental achievements in early childhood occur during play (Verenikina, Harris, & Lysaght, 2003). Following Vygotsky's perspective, Xu (2010) notes, "Play activities often serve as the natural context for young children to learn through the social interaction," provided by the approach of scaffolding (p. 490). The idea of ZPD was originally intended as a means of improving one's ability to problem solve. This connects directly to Jenkins' (2009) concept of participatory cultures given that scaffolding is essentially a feature of the culture. However, it would seem that the individual members could have more direct control over the amount of assistance or guidance being sought within this culture. Additionally, both Jenkins and Vygotsky emphasize the importance of problem solving within learning environments. Plus Jenkins defining play as a form of problem solving further connects his ideas to constructivism.

## Video Games as Play

Up to this point, play has been discussed in general terms. Examining play and games in a more specific context can provide a stronger orientation for understanding the connection of play and media literacy. Video games provide immense potential for promoting experimentation and problem solving (play) within the context of media literacy. When taking this overarching classification of play within the context of digital media such as video games, many people view these games as forms of solitary play. While many video games do feature single-player gameplay, the emergence of online multiplayer and cooperative games has opened up new avenues of playing cooperatively or competitively. However, even outside of multiplayer designed games, playing a traditionally single player can often turn into a locally multiplayer collaboration. Anecdotally, my wife loves to play a series of casual games called *Mystery Case Files*. The games are essentially interactive seek and find games, or hidden object games, much like an elaborate, digital version of a Hidden Pictures puzzles found in *Highlights* magazine. While these games were designed as single player experiences, we often find ourselves teaming up to solve some of the more challenging puzzles together or to aid the other in finding that one hidden object that eludes us. This purposeful shift of games from its intended use of solitary play to one of social play (cooperative) arguably provides one of the brightest applications within the context of education. Under the right conditions, play through the use of games can promote a more social focus within these games, moving away from a single player experience to one of collaboration, group problem-solving, and exploration.

The concept of play is unfortunately complex and, at best, ambiguous. Part of the problem in defining and conceptualizing play is that society embraces the notion that everything that is not considered work must therefore be considered play. However, lumping all activities associated with play into the concept of play, creates a nebulous construct. Taking the National Institute for Play's (2009) seven recognized patterns of play within the context of higher education, social play, storytelling, and creative play can provide a promising glance of ways to

foster increased student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and learning. Creative play involves using our imagination and creativity to transcend what we already know in our day-to-day lives to generate new ideas, which in part is an integration of other forms of play. This form of play in particular holds the promise of helping students to see how their actions can have an impact on the greater society.

### **Video Games in Education: Challenging the Work/Play Dichotomy**

A strict division appears to exist between how society conceives the notion of work and play. We don't get up in the morning to go to play; we go to work. We don't sit down to work a game with friends; we play a game. We also certainly don't assign our students "homeplay" instead of homework. This division, or dichotomy, between work and play has had a tremendous impact upon how American society views education and the respective roles that work and play take on. The foundations of education and learning have embraced the notion of work while segregating the aspect of play as something external to the learning process.

Sutton-Smith (1997) has challenged this dichotomy by suggesting that the opposite of play isn't work but rather vacillation or depression. The idea of play or leisure is commonly viewed at the expense of work and labor. In other words, any time a person is playing that is time they *could* have been working. While work tends to be primarily focused on extrinsic meaning, purpose and value, play tends to be intrinsically focused (Hinman, 1975). This tendency to conceptualize work and play in this fashion was exemplified in a study of college students. Holmes (1999) found that college students identified work as an extrinsically motivated activity. Play, on the other hand, was considered an activity that is performed voluntarily, therefore play is something that one chooses to do rather than required to do, implying that play is an intrinsically motivated activity. However, Hinman (1975) proposes that all forms of human activity contain aspects of both work and play to various degrees and therefore these activities are motivated to some extent by extrinsic *and* intrinsic factors. Work and play can alternatively be conceptualized as qualities of human experience instead of distinctly separate acts all together.



Rouzie (2000) notes that some educators believe that play within higher education has had a negative impact on student learning and the quality of their writing. This mentality views play as simply a fun distraction from more serious, more important work. As noted previously, Jenkins (2009) challenges the assumption that play is the same as fun. Jenkins notes that when playing a game, a person may not find that what he or she is doing at the moment as being particularly enjoyable. As an example, a player may find that a particular situation within the context of a game as being stressful or frustrating. Regardless of this adversity, players tend to be more resilient to these sorts of setbacks and continue playing (McGonigal, 2011). Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) have also highlighted a number of cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social benefits associated with video games. Jenkins argues that when conceptualizing play, it is really a matter of engagement. Examining play as a means of engagement, this provides an alternative perspective from the traditional discourse of the work/play dichotomy with particular applications within the educational experience.

Power and power relations are inevitable according to Foucault (1995) and therefore power does not always carry a negative connotation; power is productive. Capitalizing on the power relationships within the classroom is essential for fostering better conditions for learning. Bringing students outside of the confines of the ordered classroom is one possible way to create more enriching conditions for learning. However, whatever space utilized as an educational space must support the networking and collaboration of students. It is my argument that an integrated perspective of work and play is one potential way of effectively making use of the power relationships with higher education. Video games in particular provide opportunities for a shift in the power dynamic that exists in education and often puts the player in situations of power or given the means to overthrow oppressive forces faced in the game. Through these games, the act of play can provide the player with opportunities to work through difficult situations and to overcome challenges. Educators exercise disciplinary power within a system that holds these individuals as the holders of knowledge in a way that effectively establishes the work/play

dichotomy as truth. The results of this interplay can especially be seen within the typical college classroom. Wesch (2008) argues that education, especially higher education, is facing a “crisis of significance” in which students struggle to find meaning and significance in their own education. Reiterating Jenkins (2009), the problem students are facing is really a lack of engagement in education. Yet the dichotomy of work and play as a product of power-knowledge has arguably separated learning from engagement, which presents a dire situation in education.

By challenging the work/play dichotomy, educators can begin to view play as a form of work and vice versa. McGonigal (2011) notes that when playing a game, we are choosing to tackle unnecessary challenges. Play is often hard, challenging work that we voluntarily choose to participate in and in turn tends to be a task that we personally find rewarding (McGonigal, 2011). As noted previously, while playing a game, participants are often willing to accept failure and setbacks but continue to strive for the set goal of the game. Some even argue that play fulfills our need for better, more meaningful or significant work (McGonigal, 2011). Integrating critical play into the curriculum provides opportunities for students and instructors to escape the normalization of the system as viewed by Foucault (1995). If play truly is more focused on intrinsic factors of motivation, meaning, and purpose, it would seem natural to want to infuse our classrooms with a curriculum that encourages and promotes intrinsic learning. The idea of using meaningful game experiences as an educational tool is to blur the lines between what is discursively considered work and what is considered play. If education hopes to overcome the obstacles created by a strict focus on traditional conceptions of work, it will ultimately require the hard work of play to strike the right balance that higher education so desperately needs.

Gee (2010) proposes that video games at their core are spaces of problem solving that combines both learning and user engagement. This position coincides well with Jenkins’ (2009) conceptualization of play as experimentation within our surroundings as a means of problem solving. Gee writes:

The emerging area of digital media and learning is not just the study of how digital tools can enhance learning. It is, rather the study of how digital tools and new forms of convergent media, production, and participation, as well as powerful forms of social organization and complexity in popular culture, can teach us how to enhance learning in and out of school and how to transform society and the global world as well. (p. 14)

Using video games in education in and of itself is not what is important here. The use of video games to foster a community of engagement and to provide opportunities for students to utilize interactive game narratives to view the world through different points of view truly makes the use of play and media literacy in an educational context so impressive.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) contends that when trying to understand play, we are actually in search for metaphors that that release our imagination to fully appreciate the nuances and depth of play. When engaged in play “there is a sense of involvement *and* detachment, self-expression *and* self-transcendence, individuality *and* cooperation,” (Gordon, 2008, p. 7). The complex nature of play ultimately provides a breadth of potential in media literacy education. Jenkins (2009), through the perspective of constructivism, presents a compelling argument of play as engagement. Giving students the freedom to experiment with media in an engaging, supportive environment provides substantial educational value. Play and games when used with purpose in education has the potential to create a culture of participation and engagement that will provide students with skills vital for success in a quickly shifting world. In the end, educators must allow students the ability to navigate these new media landscapes in an education culture that promotes the sharing and collaboration of ideas.

Jenkins (2009) provides one direct application for video games in education through his conceptualization of new media literacies. The media literacy of play actually represents just one of several potential media literacies that video games could potentially teach. In addition, the media literacies of performance, simulation, negation all have connections to educational implications that narrative-focused video games might provide. Simulation refers to the ability to

interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. Performance is the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. Negotiation is the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

While video games carry distinct educational benefits within the context of play, another dimension of video games in regard to the broader conceptualization of curriculum must also be explored further: Video games as unique narrative experiences.

### **Video Games as Narrative**

Turning focus towards understanding the importance of narrative that emerges through the play of narrative-focused video games, many researchers have examined the unique characteristics present in many video game narratives. Interactivity serves as one of the core differentiating features of video games compared to books, movies, and other forms of narrative (Cassidy, 2011; Qin, Rau, & Salvendy, 2009). When discussing the interactivity of video game narratives, a frequent comparison is made to Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books (Cassidy, 2011; Dubbleman, 2011). This highlights the unique qualities that video game narratives possess. Cassidy (2011) contends that "a video game reader is not only an author in their ability to interpret meaning, but also in their (albeit very limited) ability to collaboratively contribute to the events of the narrative, through their interaction with the text," (p. 295). Cassidy discusses the concept of collaborative fiction, or a phenomenon in which an original narrative is created and then released for others to make their own unique contributions with the rules set by that original narrative. Gee (2007, 2011) notes that players will often construct their own stories within the game of who they wish for their character to be. The game provides players with the freedom to construct these character stories through choices allotted to the player through gameplay. Jenkins (2004) discusses how many video games can utilize environmental storytelling and the creation of evocative spaces to produce stories that are enacted and embedded. Games can provide a multitude of possibilities for storytelling and meaning construction beyond the set narrative of the

game itself as a form of emergent storytelling (Jenkins, 2004). For examples, players of *The Sims*, a life simulator, have even created a graphic novel of their experience of playing as a poor, single parent (Gee, 2011).

Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown, and Horner (2004) discuss a rhetorical approach to narrative analysis by which the concept of enthymeme emerges. Enthymeme refers to a logical inference in which a part of the argument may be missing or incomplete. This missing component could be a major or minor premise of the story or even the conclusion according to Feldman et al. Some research done by Microsoft that was presented at GDC (Game Developers Conference) revealed that gamers typically struggle to recall the plot of the games they play. Hendersen (as cited in Abernathy & Rouse, 2014) found that gamers used fewer words when attempting to retell game narratives, which was significantly shorter than the number of words used to retell the narratives from movies or books. This research concluded that while players were capable of rich thinking about narratives, players had a more difficult time reflecting upon game plots with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead they tended to focus more upon short vignettes and episodic recollections of the game narratives. However, players were able to consistently remember memorable characters from their games but not necessarily that character's overall role in the plot. Additionally, conversation about game narratives tended to be dominated by discussion of gameplay instead of the actual stories being told.

Many games purposefully omit information in order for players to infer and construct their own meanings and conclusions as well as to promote player curiosity (Human, 2010; Qin, Rau, Salvendy, 2009). This brings into question how this purposeful withholding of information potentially relates to how players retell the stories they experience. However, the current study is interested in the inferences players make and how this ties in with the construction of meaning that occurs through filling in the gaps. Allowing players to make their own inferences is one thing that stood out for me in the interactive storytelling game, *Gone Home*. Tapping into the omissions that participants make in their retelling of game stories can provide a lot of great insights about

the meaning making process. Getting players to talk about the inferences they draw from the narratives may be the key in many regards.

### *Narratology vs Ludology*

Cassidy (2011) highlights the debate between narratologists and ludologist regarding how to best study and understand video games. Personally, this form of dichotomous thinking seems misguided. I argue that the interaction between gameplay and narrative helps us to best understand video game narratives and how the player makes sense of these experiences, or what I conceptualize as ludonarratology (the interaction of play and story). Many video games are neither purely narrative experiences nor purely gameplay experiences. Even if a narrative does not appear to be present in a game, that does not prevent the player from constructing his or her own narrative. Gee (2009) notes in his analysis of *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* that his primary interest is not in the story the game tries to tell (going so far as to say that he does not care for story in video games and rarely follows those stories) but rather the player's story. For Gee, the story of the game merely sets the stage and helps to convey emotion what our actions mean within the game world. According to Gee's (2009) perspective, "The story in a game... helps determine the game's 'universe of discourse'. It tells us what is in the world, why it is there, what things mean, and the ways in which we can and cannot act in the world," (p. 4).

Cassidy (2011) positions video games as narratives and conceptualizes video games as a medium that can be understood through the interaction of narratology (story) and ludology (gameplay). Gee argues that this presents players with opportunities to expand upon their own identity story by learning more about themselves through the course of the game narrative. Video games provide players with the opportunity actually play the metaphorical hand that has been dealt to a person they virtually embody within the game. Gee (2007) describes how video games such as *Deus Ex* allow the player to uncover the story through their exploration and that different players can take away different things from the narrative experience. Four factors are at play in many video game narratives according to Gee (2007): 1) Choices made by the game designers

(the authors of the game), 2) The order in these choices unfold based upon the actions of the player, 3) The actions a player chooses to carry out as the main character of the game, and 4) The players imaginative projections regarding the characters, plot, and game world. Gee further notes that factor 2 and 3 are specifically unique to video games as a storytelling medium in which the story is embodied in a player's actions and choices.

### *Identity Stories in Video Games*

*"Identities are narratives" (Yuval-Davis as cited in Riessman, 2008).*

Gee (2011) contends that narratives frequently serve as a means of making sense of the world. Using the metaphor of life as a game, Gee argues that stories help us to take stock of the hand we have been dealt and in turn we construct what he calls an "identity story." He describes these stories as "the story about who we are in the face of what we have been given and what we have made of it," (Gee, 2011, p. 354). Additionally, often our identity story positions ourselves as an agent of change and control. Video game narratives frequently provide players with unique opportunities to "play the hands other people were dealt" and by extension allow players to construct new identity stories that move beyond their own. The difference between video games and other narrative mediums is the ability for the audience to make decisions and actions that have consequences within the context of the game world. While the game itself likely (not always) has a set narrative to tell, following a set narrative path that ultimately leads to the same destination, the game presents players with rich opportunities to construct stories of who their character is and who this person will become over the course of the game.

Gee (2007) proposes three types of identity that manifest through the playing of video games that were briefly touched on in Chapter 1. As Gee notes, these identities operate simultaneously when playing a game. I will utilize *Gone Home* as an example for situating these types of identity using myself as the player; however, note that I will be using Gee's structure for explaining these concepts in relation to myself. The first identity occurs when players take on the identity of a virtual character within the game environment, called the virtual identity (Shawn

Rose as *Kaitlin Greenbriar*). I am playing as Kaitlin, but the emphasis in this identity is upon the virtual character that acts within the confines of the game world. This represents a balance between actions as a result of the player and actions as a result of game world. The second identity is my real-world identity (*Shawn Rose as Kaitlin Greenbriar*), where the emphasis is upon the real-world identity of myself. We all have a multitude of identities in regard to various aspects of our lives. The parts of my real-world identity that become active while playing the game is a product of my in-game experiences of playing Kaitlin Greenbriar. The third identity is the projective identity (*Shawn Rose as Kaitlin Greenbriar*) in which I as the player project my own values and motivations into the game character I embody or in other words my desires for who I wish for Kaitlin Greenbriar to be. Isbister (2016) elaborates further upon this projective identity in that the players project themselves into characters through visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy levels of experience. The player uses the virtual body of the playable character as a vehicle of action (visceral), is rewarded by strategies and actions that have been set by the game designers which tells us how the character should behave in order to be successful (cognitive), is given the option to explore social qualities the player may not possess in reality through their virtual character (social), and in turn may begin to form alternate versions of him- or herself in the game (fantasy). Unlike *Gone Home*, which features the player taking on the role of a fixed character, other games allow players to create and customize their characters that they will play in the game. This practice is common in MMO's but also single-player role-playing games such as the *Elder Scrolls* series or more recent entries in the *Fallout* series.

Character creation and customization are additional features that games often utilize to promote emotional identification with the avatars and NPCs within a game (Isbister, 2016). Isbister (2016) and Gee (2011) both explore this concept of identification through the character creation process. To provide this with a more grounded context, it might be helpful to explore what this creation process can look like for the player. When I first started playing *Fallout 4*, a game that takes place in the post-apocalyptic wastelands of Boston, Massachusetts, I was given



the option to customize what my character looked like down to excruciating details. Eye, hair, and skin color as well as gender and hair style are of course options, but to say that the creation tool utilized in this game is robust is quite the understatement. By clicking on different part of the character's face, the player can sculpt the size, shape, and angle of never minuscule detail or use a wide variety of preset options. Scars, birthmarks, freckles, and facial hair can even be added to give my character, well, more character (Figure 2.1). I had played numerous action games where the protagonist was male, so I decided that I wanted a female in this game (unlike its predecessor, *Fallout 4* features voice acting for the character you create). Not only could I construct the physical appearance of this avatar but also her unique spectrum of skills and talents in the categories of strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck (S.P.E.C.I.A.L.). I made my character, who I named Lydia (she looked like a Lydia to me) an intelligent, charismatic, and perceptive woman and mother who would navigate the wastelands with intelligence and awareness of her surroundings. I made the decision in that moment, that my character wasn't going to be a brute of physical strength but rather someone clever who would



**Figure 2.1** – Examples of the character customization options in *Fallout 4*.

be able to work her way out of situations without fighting if possible. As sad as it is to admit, I played with my character's features and

finessed the tiniest details for nearly 2 hours before I even started “playing” the actual game. Oddly enough, I planned to play the game in the first person perspective (though I could toggle to third person at any time). So why did I spend so much time creating a character I would only see during cut scenes? In my mind, I was already constructing who this person was and the gameplay

style I would take in this game. I was creating a story of my character through this process that would be carried with me as I explored the sandbox world of *Fallout 4*.

Obviously not all games provide this level of detail in the character customization process or even give you an opportunity to create your avatar. Yet, even games that set the character you will embody provide opportunities for identification. In these games, you are taking on the perspective of a predefined character. Identification is defined as “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the event were happening to them,” (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). Cohen notes that our ability to identify with others, including media characters, ties directly into the development of our self-identity. How we perceive others and visa versa is tied to self-identity, and media images are linked to this self-identity. By identifying with others depicted through media, this provides the audience an opportunity to experience social reality from an alternative perspective, which in turn plays a role in the development of self-identity (Cohen, 2001; Erikson, 1968).

### **Connecting Emotionally to Video Games**

Rigby and Ryan (2011) suggest that video games can result in feelings of “emotional and narrative presence” while in the game. They propose, “Games simply enhance our innate ability to emotionally engage in fictional worlds by enabling meaningful participation,” (p. 91). Rigby and Ryan asked players to report on the authenticity of the emotions the game being played elicited. Their findings revealed that most players felt more emotionally present within games that depicted more realistic environments and real-life situations. This provides interesting insights into the role that interaction plays on emotional responsiveness within games, with one of the unique qualities of video games when compared to other narrative media being their interactive nature (Cassidy, 2011). Given the evidence that realistic situations and environments may be connected to emotional presence within video games, games such as *Gone Home*, which takes place in a real-world setting of exploring a family home in 1995, could provide enhanced opportunities for exploring authentic emotionality in games.

Cassidy (2011) suggests that because the player never becomes the character he or she "controls" in a video game, and the only protagonist of any video game narrative is actually the player. However, Gee's (2011) hybrid conceptualization of player/character provides a much richer context for understanding the meaning making process through video game narratives. Within the context of video games, meaning and significance are both situated (situation-specific) and embodied (Gee, 2007). For this study, the more complex interaction of virtual, real-life, and projective identities suggested by Gee will be utilized for understanding the meaning making process and perspective taking.

It is interesting that Cassidy conceptualized narrative and gameplay as seemingly separate constructs. However, Dubbleman (2011) explores two contrasting views of the relationship between interactivity and narrative in video games. One perspective views the player as an author who guides the narrative through the direct control of the central character's actions. Another perspective views the player as "an embodied participant in the world of the story," (p. 158). Gee's (2011) hybrid player conceptualization would actually suggest that both of these perspectives may be occurring for the player simultaneously, but Dubbleman attempts to differentiate representational and presentational narrative logic within the context of video games. While some argue that the means of transmission (acted vs. written or told) differentiates these narrative logics, another way of conceptualizing the difference is through how a story "addresses the audience," (Dubbleman, 2011, p. 162). An example of this would be the breaking of the fourth wall (characters looking at the "camera" or giving the impression that characters in the game are talking directly to the player) that occurs in presentational narratives while the fourth wall is preserved in representational narratives. This comes down to audience presence vs. absence physically in the narrative world. Dubbleman references several games such as *Half-life* and *Bioshock* that he believes exemplifies presentational logic. However, every game that he proposes as presentational are first-person perspective games, while his single example of a representational game, *Heavy Rain*, is a third-person perspective game. Player positionality

appears to be Dubbleman's central concept here. While I understand his argument that when players feel "present" within the game narrative they will tend to feel more immersed in the narrative. Personally, the game *Heavy Rain* provided me with some of the most emotionally immersive situations I have ever encountered in a video game. Even though the events occurred from a third person perspective, I still imagined myself in the situations faced in the game and I made decisions based upon what I imagined I would do in that situation. This again suggests that a player's identity story may be at play in these situations. I will again be using my personal experiences, this time with *Heavy Rain*, as an example to help to explore this concept further.

In the story of *Heavy Rain*, Ethan Mars has his son kidnapped by a serial killer known as the Origami Killer. He is given five trials that he must endure if he ever wants to see his son again. Up until the fourth trial I had willingly driven against oncoming traffic, crawled through shards of glass and nearly electrocuted myself, and had eventually cut off one my (Ethan's) fingers in front of a web cam for the killer to see in gruesome fashion all to prove to the killer that I truly loved my child and would do anything to save him. The fourth trial asked me to not harm myself but rather take the life of another person. Determined to do anything to save his son, Ethan takes the gun left for him by the killer and follows the directions left behind to a man he has been tasked to kill. While my avatar of Ethan stands on the landing outside of this man's apartment, the visual cues that the game provides for how to interact with the world around me stutter and shake reflecting the nervousness and fear that Ethan must be facing. The game provides the opportunity to see what thoughts are going through the character's mind as the game is played. Typically, by holding the assigned button, a variety of phrases and words float around the character's head. Yet in this moment those thoughts are swimming frantically, shaking and blurring making it difficult to process what is truly going through Ethan's mind. Building up the courage to knock on the door, eventually our intended victim answers wearing a white undershirt and a bathrobe. Noticing Ethan's jittery nerves, he assumes that Ethan is simply there to buy drugs from him. So, our target is a drug dealer. Does that make this terrible task easier to

swallow? Pulling out his gun and charging into the man's apartment, Ethan hesitates which results in the man pulling out a shotgun (note that the game does not give the player the opportunity to walk away instead). A dramatic chase ensues as Ethan dodges his way through this man's house trying not to get shot himself. Ethan ultimately becomes cornered in what appears to be a girl's bedroom. The man charges forward with his gun drawn and pulls the trigger. Ethan tenses in preparation for the fatal shot. He hears the click of the trigger but no shot is fired. Again, a click but no shot. Ethan again pulls his own gun as the robed man drops to his knees begging to be spared. The man grabs a photo of his two daughters from the girls' room. He tells Ethan their names, frantically trying to reason with him not to kill. I, the player, now have a choice.



**Figure 2.2** – Moral Dilemma: The player (as Ethan Mars) must decide this man's fate in *Heavy Rain*.

I can kill this man, a drug dealer, but also a father just like Ethan (just like me) or I can spare his life. If I kill the man, it might get me one step closer to saving my son. If I don't kill him, I might anger the deranged killer that has sent me on a task to become a killer myself. It was in that moment that I, as the player, had to pause the game and put the controller down. How could I take the life of a father or anyone for that matter, regardless of his unsavory dealings?

That would make me no better than the killer who now held my own son captive. No. I could not do it. I would not do it. Saving my son at the cost of another person's life... I could not in good conscience do that even if that meant that I would "fail" the Origami Killer's trial. I put myself, my personal identity as a father, into the role of Ethan Mars in that moment. As I picked up the controller again after collecting my thoughts, I had Ethan put his gun away. "I'm a father too... but I'm no killer." I (as the player) had only recently had a new son of my own. While it is easy to say that you would do anything to save your own child, I had to ask myself what would my son think when he was grown and learned that I took someone else's life to save his own. Even though I have never personally experienced a terrible situation such as this, I tried to imagine myself as Ethan and took actions that reflect what I would only hope I would do in reality.

There was a line I was not willing to cross to save my own son in *Heavy Rain*, and the narrative adjusted to that decision. The game did not end because I "failed" complete the fourth trial to killers liking, but I would have to live with those consequences of my action as I continued playing. This helps to illustrate Gee's (2007, 2008, 2011) theoretical perspective of identity, embodiment, and identification with video games. At the conclusion of Dubbleman's article he begins to conceptualize these different narratological perspectives and perhaps being more interconnected, which seems to reflect many of Gee's arguments. Dubbleman writes, "Rather than considering presentological and representological narratives as essentially disconnected, then, we should better understand them as converging in our engagement with what Jenkins (2006: 20–21) refers to as transmedia storytelling," (p. 168).

From a psychological perspective, identification with media characters is an imaginative process in which the audience imagines him- or herself as actually being that characters in which their own personal identity is replaced with the identity of the media character (Cohen, 2001). This contrasts with Gee's position in regard to the hybrid player identity in which the player simultaneously embodies the identity of the video game character while still carrying his or her personal identities. Gee (2008c) perceives a three-way interaction occurring within video games.

In many video games, players inhabit the goals of a character in the game world, a world attuned to those goals, and the player gains a surrogate in the form of a game character or avatar that the player plays. However, the player may also project their own goals and perspectives as they take on the role of game characters who serve as the player's surrogate (Gee, 2008c). In addition, the game character's identity and goals are imposed upon the player while the player simultaneously imposes his or her own identity and goals on the game character. Yet even from Gee's perspective, imagination plays a certain role in identification and embodiment with video characters, stories, and worlds.

### *Social Imagination*

Imagination is often conceptualized as a private process. Robinson (2011) suggests that imagination is the source of creativity, yet imagination and creativity are not the same. Robinson notes, "We can take a different view of the present by putting ourselves in the minds of others: we can try to see with their eyes and feel with their hearts. And in imagination we can anticipate many possible futures," (p. 141). This conceptualization of imagination reflects many of the ideas utilized by Maxine Greene. Imagination can liberate us from our current situation and provides the promise of transforming the present (Robinson, 2011). For Robinson, the typical view of imagination is a process of internal consciousness, while creativity involves taking action, actually doing something. However, Maxine Greene's utilizes a slightly different conceptualization of imagination within the context of what she calls social imagination. Social imagination, through the use of aesthetic experiences, in part focuses on fostering wide-awakeness about the society and encourages the imagining of "things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 1995, p. 16). "Imagination is not only the power to form mental images, although it is partly that. It is also the power to mold experience into something new, to create fictive situations," (Greene, 2001, p. 31). This quote from Maxine Greene exemplifies the core of how I conceptualize social imagination. Furthermore it builds directly into Cohen's (2001) work

in identification as means of viewing the world through the perspectives of others, just as Greene talks of attempting to view the world as it could be otherwise.

“We want to create situations in classrooms that will release students for lived and informed encounters. We want to make the richest sorts of experiences possible; we want choices to be made,” (Greene, 2001, p. 27). As educators, it can be argued one of our tasks is to empower students to notice what there is to notice (Greene, 2001). However, Greene notes that the significance of this noticing is vital in education. Video games can often challenge the player to notice what there is to notice, often times leaving clues to what might be occurring in the game world, but might just as easily be missed or overlooked by players who do not pay attention to those details. Some of these games treat players as having intelligence and invite players to construct their own understanding of the game’s world and story.

Greene believes that teachers should become these challengers and “be there in the first person ... eager to tell our stories and listen to others, eager to attend to the changing culture’s story in which so many narratives intermesh,” (Wilson, 2003, p. 211). Social imagination may also allow educators to partially combat the difficulty surrounding the null curriculum, or that which is omitted from the curriculum. Greene notes that absent voices suggest some form of presence in the fact that they are absent (Greene, 1995). By accentuating the importance of letting varied voices be heard, we can only strengthen our curriculum by preparing students to not only to face the future but to face the present as well (Robinson, 2011). For Maxine Greene (1995), works of art, which I contend that video games can be works of art, provide the power to help us engage with these works and a means of exploring the ways in which they can examine social deficits in a more meaningful and significant way. As noted in Chapter 1, the value of engaging in social imagination allows absent voices to be heard that would otherwise not. Social imagination specifically attempts to bring this personal process into a public space. By viewing art through alternative perspectives, through community sharing and discussion, the hope is that ideas to address concerns of society can be achieved (Greene, 2001). Greene (2001) describes this



process as imaginative action, which occurs in various phases. Our imaginations, perceptions of the world, and values are all changeable (Greene, 1995).

By engaging with artwork it provides members of the community a window in which to view to the world differently. Whether looking at artwork on canvas or other mediums, this artwork possesses the potential to simultaneously serve as a portal to another view of the world and also a looking glass that reflects the troubles of our own. Just as when you look through a window, reflections of yourself can be seen overlaying the scene on the other side of the glass pane. By noticing what there is to be noticed, members of a community can begin to engage with this alternate perspective presented by the artwork as well as the varied perspectives that make up the community which is united for a given purpose. Using our imagination to envision things differently can be considered a first step toward acting upon a belief that something can actually be changed (Greene, 1995). By extending, Greene's concept to social imagination to encompass video games as a part of aesthetic education, similarities and connections begin to emerge.

### **Educational Benefits: Exploration, Engagement, and Empathy**

Stuart Brown (2015) notes that the act of play can be a conduit for exploring options that a person may not pursue otherwise. Brown refers to this as the exploration of the possible. When discussing video games it needs to be conceptualized through the concepts of exploration, engagement, and empathy.

One way of reconceptualizing play is to think of the concept as exploration. The purposeful use of video games within the classroom provides one compelling look at how play, when integrated effectively within education, can have powerful results. The purposeful use of video games within the classroom provides a compelling look at how media literacy and play integrate effectively within education. One of the most compelling and impressive examples comes from Tim Rylands, a former United Kingdom primary education teacher and recipient of the Becta ICT in Practice award in 2005. Now retired from teaching to help other teachers integrate his techniques, Tim used the *Myst* series of computer games in his literacy classes as a

means of developing creative and expressive writing skills in his classroom (Sandford & Williamson, 2005). The games in the *Myst* series place the player in beautiful but foreign worlds, which promotes exploration, experimentation, and allows players to solve puzzles and read journals along the way to move the story forward. Sandford & Williamson (2005) provide an excellent example of how Rylands' class is structured:

Sitting in the centre of the class, facing the whiteboard on which the game is projected, Tim takes his class 'for a walk' through the detailed first-person landscapes of the game, narrating as he goes or sharing the task with a member of the class. Every student has a journal in which they record their impressions and reactions to the scenes in front of them, other children's turns of phrase or good examples of writing from the game itself. These recorded snippets of language inform their own written and spoken language abilities. The class also reads sections of Tolkein's [sic] *The Hobbit*, and compares the visual and written accounts of the two fantastical imaginary worlds. (p.18)

However, to fully appreciate how Rylands' classroom is structured and how it actually works, seeing the classroom in action provides a much greater insight (see videos of his class on YouTube and found in the references).

Using Tim Rylands' classroom as a case example of sorts, his students are not just using games and digital media as a resource in learning, they are also involved in the creation of their own media. Within Rylands' classroom, his students are engaging in practically every pattern of play outlined by the National Institute for Play; storytelling, social play, imaginative play, and even body play are all occurring within this learning environment. The students are writing their own stories taking place in these worlds, imagining how to take care of the plants in this foreign landscape (Sandford & Williamson, 2005), attempting to take on the perspective of the characters within the game, and imagining themselves actually standing on the sandy beach or lush forest path. The children even spontaneously use their bodies in play, jerking themselves from side to side, throwing their hands into their air, as if riding a roller coaster as they watch and engage with

what is depicted on screen (Rylands, 2006a). As was noted previously, games designed for solitary play can provide astounding opportunities to transform their use into a more social context of play. While this use of play and media literacy seems well and good, it is important to note that this simply wasn't just a fun diversion for the students. Students actually improved in literacy with 57% of students performing above grade level in English and 100% of the boys performing at grade level or higher in 2005 (Rylands, 2006b).

As mentioned previously, a problem facing the idea of play (especially within education) is that many people don't view it seriously. Using media and video games within the classroom might be viewed as a copout for doing real work, real teaching. However, taking Tim Rylands as an example, much of the effectiveness of using video games in his class comes from the hard work he puts into the lesson by preparing related activities ahead of time, creating detailed materials, and being mindful of how to elicit quality responses from his students (Sandford & Williamson, 2005). Therefore, a teacher would likely be working just as hard if not harder to prepare such a lesson. So the question emerges of why should we even bother with such a thing? The answer boils down to student (and teacher) engagement.

Using play within the context of education appears to provide a great deal of potential in promoting engagement, which is critical for learning. With the case of Tim Rylands' class, students are not only collaborating together through the use of video games, the class also embraces aspects of Web 2.0 technologies to create their own media and multimedia presentations (Rylands, 2006b). The use of games in education is not the answer in every context, as they are simply tools for promoting engagement and learning through play.

One way of viewing play within the context of higher education is to consider it as "purposeful play" in which play and work are effectively integrated. This term has begun to appear in the literature, but I have reservations about this specific terminology. Foremost, the concept of purposeful play implies that other forms of play do not carry a purpose. In addition, it reinforces the false dichotomy of play being frivolous while work is purposeful. As Hinman

(1975) noted, both work and play hold meaning, purpose, and value, both extrinsically and intrinsically depending upon the context. Arguably, the concept of purposeful play stems from a means of challenging the work/play dichotomy yet simultaneously reinforcing the imposed structure. Others have called this kind of play meaningful play. According to Salen and Zimmerman (2003), meaningful play occurs “when the relationship between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of a game,” (p. 316). Flanagan (2009) proposes an alternative discipline for understanding the value of play in education with what she calls critical play. Critical play is the process of creating and occupying “play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life,” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 6). Integrating a critical play approach in education allows instructors and students to critically analyze social, cultural, and political themes within play or game spaces.

However, if we look at the impact of video games in a broader educational sense, that video games can teach players valuable things regardless if it occurs inside or outside the classroom, it is important to examine the ways in which video games may promote emotional understanding and empathy. Isbister (2016) proposes that two unique qualities exist within video games that differentiate their ability to carry emotional impact when compared to other forms of media, namely the concepts of flow and choice. Due to the interactive nature of video games, this medium provides players with meaningful choices through gameplay (Isbister, 2016). The actions that players take carry consequences, which Isbister argues game designers utilize to create opportunities of emotional connection. Gee (2007) notes that good video games provide players with multiple choices that correspond with how the player prefers to play and provides multiple solutions to the problems faced in the game (i.e. sneak based the guards with no bloodshed or rush in with guns blazing). This connects well with the new media definition of play as experimentation in media environments as a form of problem solving (Jenkins, 2010).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) concept of flow is a state in which a person feels a sense of being fully engaged and absorbed in a task that he or she finds both challenging and

intense. A flow experience often occurs when the challenge of a task and our level of skill are in balance. Csikszentmihalyi notes, "Games are an obvious source of flow and play is the flow experience par excellence," (p. 37). When in a state of flow, a person wishes to remain within that state because of the intense enjoyment and reward felt he or she gains from the experience. Eight factors define this state of flow including a challenging activity that requires skill, the merging of actions and awareness, the existence of clear goals, immediate feedback, concentration on the specific task, a sense of control, a loss of self-consciousness, and an altered sense of time. Brown (2010) notes that for a child the purpose of play is actually more play. Therefore, if work were more like play, we might see a seemingly paradoxical increase in work. When we experience a state of flow, the task in which we engage in has us working at the edge of our ability (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). It is through this balance of challenge and ability that drives flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Isbister, 2016). Gee (2007) notes that good video games can create flow states by creating situations that are doable yet still challenging, which has the player playing at the outer edge of their gameplay capabilities.

Hobbs (2011) pinpoints video games' ability for immersion to be central facet of what makes video games such a popular medium, a principle that ties in well with the concept of flow. This immersion in part stems from the interactivity allotted through the use of player choice. Just like in life, players are not truly free to make any choice they please because social structures exist that determine what choice can be made. As a leader in the field of media literacy, Hobbs notes that the audience must be cognizant of how storytellers and game designers structure choices in games.

If students become players actively participating in a game, constructing and critiquing knowledge along the way rather than passive consumers of knowledge, the common power differential in education potentially gets uprooted. Playful learning can also provide opportunities to examine discursively constructed structures of race, gender, ethics, and inequalities. These are all serious issues that can be challenging to work through. However, if we view play as a matter

of engagement, it could be argued that using some form of play (serious, purposeful, meaningful, critical, or whatever one wishes to label it) to engage students and educators in active discourse is vital to the future of education.

Seeing how play and, by extension, engagement has had impressive applications within elementary education, the question then becomes how can this sort of student engagement translate to the college classroom. Play can also be conceptualized as a form of problem solving and experimentation (i.e. Jenkins, 2009). Games are one way of integrating a greater level of play into the curriculum. From a different point of view, Flanagan (2010) argues, “Games are particularly well-suited to supporting educational or activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key outcome,” (p. 52). She suggests that the ability for the player to take on different perspectives or roles within the game provides an immersive means of potentially establishing empathy. The benefit of games is not necessarily to serve as a direct simulation but rather to promote open dialogue between players and the decisions made within the game. This perspective would seem to counteract the idea that video games in general result in aggressive, less empathetic players (such as in Anderson, Ihori, Bushman, and Rothstein, 2010). It should be noted that not every video game is necessarily appropriate within an educational context. However, taking Dewey’s (1938) concept of intelligent activities into account illustrates that simply using a game as a means of media literacy and learning must be considered purposefully. Gee (2010) proposes that video games at their core are spaces of problem solving that combines both learning and user engagement, which coincides well with Jenkins’ (2009) view of play as experimentation in our surroundings as a means of problem solving.

### **Moving Away from Violence and Towards Empathy in Video Games**

Yet not everyone sees the benefits of video games and popular media as education tools. With the profound growth of the Internet and video games, concerns have arisen regarding how play within a media landscape differs from traditional forms of play, of which there are many. Stuart Brown argues that while video games provide some of the benefits of play, it is only

through the use of all of our senses within the physical world that truly produces authentic empathy, trust, and social skills. While one would be hard pressed to disagree that play outside of digital media is important, I do take point with the notion that authentic empathy, trust, and collaboration are somehow unattainable through these formats. Research such as a meta-analytic study by Anderson, Ihori, Bushman, and Rothstein (2010) paints a bleak picture of the negative effects of violent video games by suggesting that violent games are correlationally linked to decreases in empathy and increases in aggression. Popular media sites frequently pick up this sort of study and tout them as causal relationships. This alone implies the importance of media literacy education, but the issue of larger concern for this paper is that perhaps video games can actually have a positive impact within education. However, taking a closer look at these criticisms of video games from a media literacy perspective needs to at least be addressed first.

Compared to Jenkins, Diane Levin (2010) takes a more protectionist approach to media literacy. She conceptualizes media, especially violence, sexualization, and consumerism in the media, as having a negative impact upon children in profound ways. In particular, she argues that media culture actually transforms the process of learning in a way that undermines play, problem solving, active learning, and social development. One of her central strategies for combating these negative effects is to “protect children as much as possible from exposure to media and products that can teach harmful lessons,” (p. 23). Following Levin’s position, it would appear that media and play are diametrically opposed. However, I would argue that this is where targeted imaginative play becomes an imperative. Engaging in imaginative or pretend play encourages one to take on the perspective of someone else. This is something that video games do exceptionally well. Jenkins (2009) notes that while concerns regarding the negative effects of media should not be dismissed, this focus provides an incomplete perspective. Instead of protecting students from media, Jenkins argues that teachers should instead engage students in critical dialogue so that they develop a deeper understanding of their experiences with media.

Increasingly more and more research has begun to shift the focus away from violent video game research and toward research on prosocial games. A prosocial video game is one where the player through the game avatar engages in helping and supporting behaviors with other players or NPCs in nonviolent ways (Gentile et al., 2009). Gentile et al. conducted three different studies using different samples to explore any connections between the playing prosocial video games and prosocial behaviors outside of playing the game. One of Gentile et al.'s studies found evidence that video games that feature prosocial gameplay related significantly with measures of prosocial behaviors including helping behavior, cooperation and sharing, empathy, and emotional awareness. Evidence was also found that repeated play of prosocial games can result in short-term as well as long-term increases in prosocial behaviors.

While Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2011) found evidence of decreasing levels of empathy from college student over time which they attribute to the increase of media consumption, it is important to consider the types of media students consume. This tendency to lump all forms of media as being all the same is a misguided exercise. Isbister (2016) challenges this monolithic conceptualization of video games. Just as there are different genres of books and movies with different messages they intend to express, video games have their own unique genres and experiences they attempt to create for the player. However, video games by and large are still discussed as if they represent a singular uniform medium (Isbister, 2016). Interestingly the term "indie game" has increasingly been thrown around as if it represented its own genre. An indie game is simply a game made by an independent developer. This provides them more creative freedom when compared to going through a game publisher who provides the funds to create the game but also has more say in the final product, often focused more on how to turn a profit instead of staying true to the designers' original vision. Referring to a game as an indie game tells us more about how the game was created as opposed to the genre of game it represents. Like other forms of media, video games can tackle sensitive topics that allow the player to take on



alternative perspectives. However, what truly makes video games a unique medium for eliciting emotional response is the type of emotions that a player can experience.

### *Promoting Empathy and Perspective Taking*

One game developer has proposed that the term “empathy game” should be used to categorize games designed to bring about emotional responses from the player (Caballero, 2014). While this may be compelling as there are certainly games that intend to develop feelings of empathy through story and gameplay, I believe it does a disservice to other games that have the potential for engaging players empathetically even if the game was not designed explicitly for that goal. Caballero considers the following games to fall within the empathy games genre, though it is by no means an exhaustive list: *Gone Home*; *PaPo y Yo*; *Beyond: Two Souls*; *Two Brothers*; *Papers, Please*; and *That Dragon, Cancer*. However, not all gamers like this genre of game. Many of these games such as *Gone Home* and *Everybody Has Gone to the Rapture* have received the derogatory classification by gamers as being “walking simulators.” A walking simulator commonly refers to a game that involves the player exploring a virtual environment with the primary gameplay involving the player walking around to uncover the narrative of the world. A glance at the comments section of many gaming websites (such as IGN, Gamespot, Polygon, etc.) will reveal that many gamers criticize these video games as not being video games at all. However, applying McGonigal’s (2011) framework of what makes a game, these are clearly games but they represent a non-traditional perspective on what many consider as a game. However, the biggest criticism of these games is the fact that they tend to emphasize narrative instead of standard perceptions of gameplay (e.g. shooting, fighting, racing, or other action focused tasks) in video games.

Empathy is often conceptualized as consisting of two different, yet interrelated forms of empathy: Affective empathy and cognitive empathy (Deuthsch & Madle, 1975). One type of empathy is the construct of emotional contagion, which connects with the affective form of empathy. Emotional contagion refers to the "catching" of emotions from another person.

According to Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993), emotional contagion is defined as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person’s and, consequently, to converge emotionally,” (p. 96). Research has been able to demonstrate that emotional contagion can occur when watching another individual describe emotional aspects of their life (Hsee, Hatfield, Carlson, & Chemtob, 1990). Martin et al. (2015) studied this concept of emotional contagion of pain as it occurs with strangers compared to friends. By having undergraduate students hold their arm underwater in ice-cold water either alone, with strangers, or with friends, they examined whether emotional contagion would occur in these different situations. When participating in the ice water exercise with a friend, participants rated their pain as much worse when compared to the alone or stranger conditions. This implies that emotional contagion occurs between friends but not with strangers, which as been found to be due to the social stress resulting from being around strangers. Interestingly, when strangers were tasked with playing the video game *Rock Band*, a music/rhythm game where players use plastic instruments such as guitars and drums to simulate playing famous rock songs, even for just 15 minutes resulted in similar expressions of emotional contagion experienced when with friends. Players are working together to perform the songs as well as they can in a collaborative as opposed to competitive contexts.

Martin et al.’s (2015) study implies several things in the context of experiencing empathy within the context of video games. Games have commonly been attributed as a means of unwinding or to reduce stress, and in many games we take on the role of characters with which we embody and interact with NPCs, which the player gets to know over the course of a game. By identifying with these characters players could potentially feel that they know who these characters are, their motivations, and truly begin to understand these characters as the game and narrative unfolds over time. Therefore, it may be possible that we may experience emotional responsivity to these characters and other forms of empathy. Yet, when talking about the notion of perspective taking, this represents the cognitive form of empathy.

## *Video Games and Nonviolence*

For many video games, violence plays a major role in the gameplay. Clint Hocking (2007), a game designer, coined the term ludonarrative dissonance to refer to occurrence in which the gameplay and game narrative conflict. For example, the *Uncharted* series features a likable character named Nathan Drake who is much like a video game version of Indiana Jones. He goes on a grand adventures looking for ancient and sometimes mystical treasures and the player gets to see relationships develop between Nathan and other characters. The game depicts Nathan Drake narratively as a person the players should care about and root for, yet the gameplay accompanying this narrative strikes a stark divergence. Along the way to find fortune and glory, Nathan Drake essentially goes through wave after way of enemy combat which equates to a murderous killing spree. *Uncharted 4: The Thief's End* acknowledges this issue without addressing it by including a digital trophy achievement titled "Ludonarrative Dissonance" that unlocks when a player kills 1000 enemies in the game. Shooting and fighting are some of the most predominant game mechanics found in many video games, but there are a multitude of games that feature no violence at all. Games such as the *Myst* series, *Journey*, and, of course, *Gone Home* are just few examples that feature no violence and tell compelling stories through very different means. The use of violence in video games can create gameplay that is in discord with the serious or emotional tones of their narrative. Even in the example given previously about *Heavy Rain* that depicts a difficult moral dilemma driven by player choice, the use of violence unfortunately confounds the experience.

Nonviolence education, related closely with peace education, aims to create a culture of peace through the negation of violence and conflict (Wang, 2014). A nonviolence education approach views nonviolence as a positive force as opposed to the simple reaction against violence. The concept of nonviolence is well explained by Wang (2014):

Based upon a sense of interconnectedness, nonviolence evokes the compassionate and affiliating aspects of humanity to not only transform negative energies or dissolve

violence but also enact mutually beneficial relational dynamic for the well-being of all members in a community, including nonhuman life. (p. 68).

The conscious choice to utilize a nonviolent video game for the purposes of this study draws upon this notion of nonviolence at least in part. If we view video games as a form of problem-solving as Gee and Jenkins propose, the ability to solve problems and conflicts without violence presents itself as a compelling case. By removing the context of violence, the focus can be placed upon gameplay and narrative that reinforce the other that might otherwise prevent a player from feeling connected to the overall experience in a prosocial manner.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Building upon Dewey's (1938) notion of experiential learning, constructivism presents the idea that in order for the construction of meaning to occur, learners must first experience and apply concepts to their previous lived experience and knowledge. Two core theories are being utilized as the theoretical framework of this study: Gee's Identity Theory and an adaptation of Situated Learning Theory used in the context of narrative-focused video games.

#### *Gee's Identity Theory*

As noted in Chapter 1, this study will utilize Gee's (2000) theory of identity as well as his conceptualization that in video games, three interrelated identities are being used by the player. Broadly speaking, identity is "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context," (Gee, 2000, p. 99). Gee (2000) conceptualizes four different ways of viewing identity that are influenced by different sources of power and are based on social cultural perspectives. However, these types of identity are not mutually exclusive and often interact with one another. Context plays a large role in Nature identity (N-Identity) which represents a state developed through forces in nature, a characteristic that a person has no control over such as biological sex. Institutional identity (I-Identity) represents an identity that has been authorized by authorities within institutions. An example of an institutionally imposed identity could be that of being

considered a student based upon the rules and guidelines the institution has set forth. Discourse identity (D-Identity) serves as an individual trait recognized in the discourse with rational individuals. It is through the interaction with others in ways that bring out and reinforce the identity trait. Finally, Affinity identity (A-Identity) represents experiences shared in practice of affinity groups. Gee (2000) defines an affinity group as “allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the group's members the requisite experiences,” (p. 105). For example, being a “gamer” could be considered a form of affinity identity.

For understanding identities within the context of video games, Gee (2007) writes of virtual, real, and projective identities. Projective identities (also sometimes referred to as hybrid identities) represent the projection of a player’s perspectives and values upon a virtual character as well as the player’s viewing the development of characters as a project of what the player hopes the character will become through gameplay. These three separate but interrelated identities of players within video games were detailed extensively in the “Identity Stories in Video Games” section of this chapter. Using the Gee’s concept of N-, I-, D-, and A-identities within the context of these real, virtual, and projective identities in video games provides a core theoretical framework for research.

### *Situated Learning Theory*

Situated Learning Theory proposes that learning is embedded in the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs, in other words the learning is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning tends to occur naturally and often unintentionally, but learning occurs through doing. This concept directly echoes the perspectives of Dewey and Vygotsky. Lave and Wenger (1991) also present that situated learning involves a social element of interacting with others in what is called “communities of practice.” Gee (2007) has connected video games broadly to this idea of communities of practice, yet he chose to utilize the term affinity groups [connecting to his notion of affinity identity (Gee, 2000) and affinity spaces (Gee, 2010)]. Regardless of the term used, it simply refers to the ways in which people choose to organization themselves for activity

engagement on a sociocultural level (Gee, 2010). When connecting situated learning theory to video games, most examples will focus on multiplayer games where a community of real-world players play and collaborate together.

While engaging with a single-player narrative-focused video game, players are not directly interacting with another person in the real-world sense. However, players are often interacting with characters in simulated social situations or placed in a world that has its own culture, history, and social practices. It can be argued that situated learning can still occur in these virtual video games worlds largely because of their interactive nature. The learning that occurs in video games is applied in the same context of the game world.

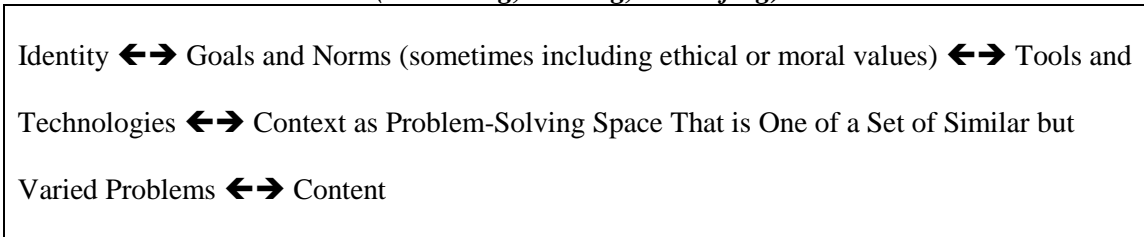
Applying situated learning theory to video game narratives presents several challenges especially when looking at single-player game experiences. Squire (2002) examined the use of communities of practice within the context of gameplay when looking at how actions are situated in the context of society and culture. “Essentially, a practice is an activity that involves skills, resources, and tools, and is mediated by personal and cultural purposes,” (Squire, 2002, n.p.). Within the context of video games, these practices are simulated as opposed to participating in a true social practice. As a result, the transferability of the learning in these simulated practice may not translate to using that understanding outside of the context of the video game (Squire, 2002).

However, Gee (2008b) has proposed a conceptualization of situated learning within the context of video games which he refers to as the Situated Learning Matrix (Figure 2.3). Situated learning arguably can occur in video game environments through situated learning by requiring players to take context-specific actions and the immediate use of the new knowledge acquired within that virtual environment. Experience occurs above the box to represent the conditions that render experience efficacious for learning. The material inside the box is meant to show how identity is formed by drawing upon goals and norms, tools and technologies, meaningful contexts of problem-solving spaces, and content. It is through this process that facts and information (content) are rendered meaningful and memorable. According to Gee (2008b), content is recruited

by problems, tools and technologies, goals and norms, and identities for use which in turn is what makes content meaningful. As Gee explains it, “Learning is situated in experience, but goal-driven, identity-focused experience,” (p. 26).

### **Situated Learning Matrix**

*Experience: Goals, Interpretation, Feedback, Explanation, Practice, Social Interaction  
(Mentoring, Sharing, Debriefing)*



**Figure 2.3** - Diagram of Gee’s Situated Learning Matrix (Gee, 2008b)

Gee’s Situated Learning Matrix will be the primary means by which situated learning will be examined in the context of this study in order to apply the concept more effectively to video game experiences and learning.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of this chapter, video games were established as complex, multimedia infused forms of play that carry their own unique strengths and weaknesses. The ambiguities and diverse views on play were discussed, and ultimately this study drew from Henry Jenkins’ concept of play as new media literacy to conceptualize video games within the context of education. In addition, this chapter attempted to explore the work/play dichotomy that permeates through society, and attempts to build a case for the important educational benefits associated with play and video games. Having establish video games as unique forms of play, the chapter explored video games as narratives, which connected with a review of the educational benefits associated with video games in regard to exploration, engagement, and empathy through a nonviolence focus. The chapter concluded with the theoretical framework used in the study: Gee’s Identity Theory and Situated Learning Theory. The next chapter will explore the specific methodology utilized in this study using a narrative inquiry approach to qualitative research.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The previous chapters have established the importance of play and how examining video games through their use of interactive narratives can have educational implications in regard to the promotion of empathy and perspective taking. The aim of this study is to develop a better understanding of how college students construct meaning from video games narratives as it ties in with their own lived experiences, their perceptions of identity, and their empathic understanding of others. Additionally, this study looks to examine how the use of narrative-focused videos can connect with new media literacies. To accomplish this, delving into student narratives of these experiences serves as the foundational source of data, which requires a more qualitative analysis. This chapter will establish the qualitative analysis framework through the lens of narrative inquiry. In addition, the chapter will highlight the participant selection process and the methods utilized for data collection and analysis. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the ethical considerations, limitations of the study, and the technique used for establishing trustworthiness in the study.

#### **Methodological Foundations**

Qualitative analysis provides a research approach that aims to explore or develop a stronger understanding and exploring of a particular phenomenon. This contrasts directly with a quantitative research tradition, which intends to predict, explain, or control. The process of qualitative analysis is inherently a messy, non-linear process but focuses on rich description,



interpretation, and the implementation of various analytical techniques. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) outline that naturalistic research (which is not limited to just qualitative research) typically uses four types of data: interviews, observation, documents, and artifacts. All of these types of data will be utilized in this study in some capacity.

Qualitative data analysis also acknowledges the presence of the researcher's voice throughout the process and that the researcher's experiences will play some role in the meaning making process. However, as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) note, qualitative data analysis must strive to capture indigenous member meanings, as opposed to imposing exogenous meanings from the researcher. As noted previously, qualitative data analysis weaves multiple analytical techniques. However, analysis may occur both inductively and deductively. A general starting point for qualitative data analysis (but not necessarily always) is through the use of open coding. Open coding requires the researcher to separate him or herself from any predetermined categories when examining data sources. The open coding process typically involves identifying as many codes as possible (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Focused coding involves a line-by-line analysis of the data that relies upon the construction of analytical themes and sub-themes that help to make sense of the data (Emerson et al. 1995; Saldaña, 2009). Empirical assertions are tentative claims that the qualitative research makes regarding observations found in the data, yet each of these assertions must be backed by strong evidentiary warrants with supporting data from across multiple sources. Analytic memos help the qualitative researcher to synthesize and conceptualize emergent findings from the data; however, a wide variety of memos may be useful throughout the analytic process. Memos can take the form of any thoughts or ideas the researcher develops as a process of working through the data and can help the researcher to take stock of the analytic process.

The general purpose of this study intends to explore how college students construct and derive meaning through the interactive narratives of video games. In addition, this study operates through a constructivist epistemology, which focuses on developing an *understanding* of a social

phenomenon. This study follows the assumption that the results will provide new qualitative knowledge regarding how college students construct meaning from their interaction with narrative game experiences and how these meanings are situated in their own lived experiences. An interpretivist theoretical perspective approach to research is interested in the interpretations of social life from a cultural and historical perspective (Crotty, 2003). Interpretivism has a particular emphasis on authenticity, reflexivity, and triangulation. Narrative inquiry served as the overarching methodology within this study, which aims to understand the world storied. This often involves analyzing narratives for coherence, order, characters, form, strings, and structure (Chase, 2010; Poindexter, 2002). Methods for this study will include observations of students playing a preselected narrative-focused video game, semi-structured individual interviews, and document analysis such as message board postings and participants' own narrations.

Conceptually, this study utilizes a constructivist epistemology. Epistemology refers to how we know what we know, the nature of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist epistemology contends that knowledge and reality are constructed. In contrast to an objectivist epistemology, constructivism recognizes no absolute truth waiting to be discovered. Instead, there is a multiplicity of realities that are socially and culturally constructed. The focus in the constructivist epistemology is developing an understanding of a phenomenon instead of attempting to explain (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The constructivist epistemology directly informs the use of an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Interpretivism is interested in forming interpretations of social phenomenon through cultural and historical perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 2003).

Using an interpretivist theoretical perspective naturally lends itself to a qualitative research approach as opposed to quantitative given this study's focus on experience and understand the construction of meaning through game narratives. Naturalistic data collection (interviews, observation, etc.), the use of multiple sources of data (not simply relying on interview alone, for example), the use of inductive interpretations, the researcher as a key

instrument of collection, attention given to participant meanings, and being holistic are all foundational characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Emergent, flexible design serves as a common feature of qualitative research and naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This suggests that the methods utilized in qualitative research may have to adjust to the circumstances as they arise.

Methodologically, this study utilizes a narrative inquiry approach. Riessman (1993) notes, "Narrative analysis allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects," (p. 70). This study will explore four different layers of storying: 1) the actual stories from video games, 2) participant stories about their experiences with video game narratives, 3) the stories from the participants' lived experiences as they relate to the game narratives, and 4) my own stories about participants' stories. Given the various layers of storying involved in this research, I argue that narrative inquiry serves as an ideal methodology for developing a better understanding of how the phenomenon operates.

It is important to note that narrative inquiry serves as an umbrella term for a widely diverse range of approaches. For example, Chase (2010) highlights a variety of approaches and analytic lenses to narrative inquiry research including psychosocial development, sociological, narrative ethnography, and autoethnography approaches. Chase notes that one sociological approach to narrative inquiry aims to focus on how individuals construct their identities through their engagement in particular activities. While this approach has primarily been used to explore narratives that stem from specific organizations, other sociological approaches provide a better fit while still allowing for the exploration of issues related to identity. This approach is interested not only in what is being storied but also how it is being storied, but the core inquiry is interested in how meaning is communicated. Chase (2010) details the type of issues researchers using this approach might pursue:

These researchers are interested in how people communicate meaning through a range of linguistic practices, how their stories are embedded in the interaction between researcher

and narrator, how they make sense of personal experience in relation to culturally and historically specific discourses, and how they draw on, resist, and/or transform these discourses as they narrate their selves, experiences, and realities. (p. 216-217)

Mishler's (1999) study on identity formation among the life histories of craft artists utilizes this particular narrative inquiry approach. Therefore, this serves as a natural fit exploring situated and embodied meaning of participants for the current study.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose that narrative research is interested in experiencing experience. From their perspective, experiencing refers to the methodology while experience refers to the phenomenon. Additionally, Riessman (2008) cites Norman Denzin who suggests that narrative inquiry does not focus on arriving at a truth of reality but is rather focused on experiences and stories that create the world in which reflect upon. Furthermore, Denzin makes the important distinction that stories are reflections on - rather than of - the world as it is told.

Within narrative inquiry, the goal of data collection focuses primarily on eliciting stories from participants. As Riessman (2008) notes, "The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements," (p. 23). In addition, ensuring that participants have had notable experiences with the phenomenon of interest is also an essential consideration. Narrative inquiry in particular involves the collecting of extensive and detailed stories from participants. Riessman (2008) notes that narrative inquiry is grounded in the particulars. However, Mishler (1999) suggests that narrative inquiry involves the co-construction of narratives between the researcher and the researched. Neander and Skott (2006), citing Mishler, note, "the researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation," (p. 297). Previously, emergent, flexible design was noted as a characteristic of qualitative research, and this certainly applies within the context of narrative inquiry. The ability to adapt research questions to better promote storying through flexible, open-ended questions is essential. However, establishing expectations from the participants is also important when eliciting and co-

constructing the rich narratives necessary for narrative inquiry. The following proposed methods serve as an initial research plan, though the specifics may change or shift once the data collection process begins.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were undergraduate college students attending a Midwestern, state university and were recruited initially utilizing an on-campus student organization devoted to gaming (tabletop and video games). I attended the gaming organization meetings and a weekend LAN party to recruit participants following a brief synopsis of what I am researching. Both male and female participants were sought as research participants within this study. While males have historically been considered the predominant audience for video games, recent trends have found that females are becoming a much larger consumer of video games. Due to the nature of narrative inquiry, participants had to be able and willing to share their own stories in connection with the video game narratives in which they participate. To help identify participants who met these prerequisites, focus groups were initially held to broadly discuss participants' thoughts on narratives in video games and times they felt emotionally connected to a game narrative (see Appendix A). Undergraduate students from any major or classification were invited to participate in the initial focus groups. Focus group recruitment utilized a snowball method of recruitment in which student could refer their friends who might also be into gaming to attend the focus group meetings.

To select full participants in the study, purposeful sampling strategies were employed to ensure the participants were willing and able to reflect and narrated their experiences with video games (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Creswell, 2007). Due to the intensive nature of narrative inquiry, five participants were selected to complete the multi-layered data collection process (i.e. focus groups, individual interviews, observation, etc.). Total participation time was 3-5 hours over multiple sessions. Some participation parameters in regard to college grade point average were established to help protect student participants who may have poor time

management skills. Informed consent was collected from all participants explaining the purpose of the study and how the data collected would be used. Participants were compensated for their time with a gift card containing an amount deemed to not be coercive for participation.

Part of the experience in playing a game such as *Gone Home* is that the player experiences and uncovers narrative as he or she plays using environmental storytelling. Exploration and discovery are integral aspects of what makes *Gone Home* a compelling interactive experience as opposed to story told in other forms of media, therefore participants to be observed playing the game did not have previous exposure to the game or what its story is about. Given the wide spread critical success of *Gone Home*, an initial concern was that participants may have at least heard of the game and could have likely heard some of the critical response (whether it be positive or negative). However, only one of the five participants noted that he had even heard of *Gone Home* previously but did not know anything about the game beyond having heard the game's name in the past.

In addition to students who participated in the focus groups, game observations, and interviews, online gaming discussion boards and blogs were also utilized occasionally to provide additional insights and perspectives for analysis. These posts were used as a supplemental source of data, but the authors were not interviewed or contacted for the purposes of this study.

### **Data Collection**

One of the core assumptions of narrative inquiry is that people construct meanings of the world through stories and writing. Narrative inquiry is particularly focused on the world as it is storied and interested in the life/story which examines to various degrees the lived experience or the content as well as the unique structural elements of the story. Qualitative research typically relies upon multiple sources of data that can be utilized to find themes that reach across all data sources (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Creswell, 2007). Data collection will utilize multiple sources of data including interviews, observation, digital documents, as well as blogs and discussion board posts on video game websites.

Data collection involving student participants occurred in three stages. Stage 1 of data collection involved focus group interview recruited from a campus gaming student organization as well as through referrals students made to their friends that might be interested in participating in the focus groups. Three focus groups were conducted to collect preliminary data about student gaming preferences and perceptions of stories in video games. However, the core purpose of the focus groups was to identify potential participants for the next two stages of data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to find participants who were open to sharing stories and could effectively discuss their gaming experiences. Students selected for the next stages demonstrated an ability to cohesively reflect upon and articulate both their gaming and real world experiences. A total of three focus groups were conducted, two occurring early in the data collection process and third group occurring after some the later stages to find additional participants.

Stage 2 consisted of gameplay observations for the participants who were selected from the previously completed focus groups. Video games are an interactive medium where player choice often serves as a hallmark of the experience, therefore participant were observed as they played a narrative-focused video game. In order to collect observational data of gameplay, the video game *Gone Home* was used to provide consistency and focus to the observed experiences as well as the subsequent interviews and document analysis in the third stage. *Gone Home* was chosen for its focus on emergent narrative through player exploration and the themes of identity discovery that unfolds over the course of the game. In addition, the game features a nonviolent and reality-based (taking place in 1995) world that is explored through the first person perspective. Players may pick up, examine, and read items found through the house. Furthermore, the game's relatively short playtime of about 2 hours to complete the game (according to <https://howlongtobeat.com/game.php?id=4010>) allowed for participants to experience the game's full narrative during the observational phase. The game was played on a PlayStation 4 gaming console in the researcher's office on the OSU campus. One beneficial function of the PlayStation 4 is the ability to capture screenshots of the game with the push of a button on the game

controller. Participants were asked to capture any moments that were significant or meaningful to them during their play session, which could be leveraged as narrative documents to be used in analysis. Participants were also asked to talk aloud regarding their thought process while playing the game, and I occasionally asked questions regarding participants' reactions and findings. The PlayStation 4 console also allows gameplay footage to be recorded with the player also being recorded in a small window in the upper corner of the screen. Gameplay footage was recorded for each participant.

Stage 3 involved individual interviews lasting approximately one hour and thirty minutes that were scheduled about a week following the Stage 2 gameplay observation. Given the research focus on student constructions of meaning from video game narratives as a form of situated learning, utilizing open-ended questions allows for the opportunity to hear participants' stories firsthand. A sample of interview questions can be found in Appendix B. However, the intention was to get participants to reflect upon meaningful narrative experiences they have encountered through the playing of video games, including *Gone Home*. This in turn provided an opportunity to explore with participants whether their lived experiences helped them to find meaning through the interactive narratives. Screenshots captured during Stage 2 were also discussed during the interview regarding why those captured moments were significant to the participant. Separate audio and video recordings were made for each interview in Stage 3.

Member checks were conducted following the transcription of gameplay and interview recordings to ensure accuracy and to ask follow-up questions as necessary. In addition to stories from interviewed participants, a wealth of stories exist on gaming discussion boards and blogs, especially in response to *Gone Home*, which provided a great opportunity for additional data for analysis that complemented the interview, observation, and document data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in narrative inquiry moves beyond simply coding the data. While thematic analysis is an important component of narrative analysis, there are other facets that must also be



analyzed. Poindexter (2002) in *Meaning from Methods* shows how a variety of data analysis techniques can be utilized (Riessman, 1993 also discusses Labov's and Gee's approaches). All authors mentioned in this section are referenced in Poindexter's article. Labov's functional model of analysis attempts to examine the structure of stories. This model suggests that stories can be conceptualized in terms of several unique parts: abstracts, orientation, complicating actions, evaluation, result, and coda. As noted in Poindexter, not all stories will necessarily follow this distinct structure. In fact, sometimes the different elements of the story will not occur in the set order Labov presents. One element of importance to note is that narrative inquiry is not simply interested in the content of the story alone. Besides thematic analysis, structural, literary, and visual analyses are additional strategies. Analyzing narratives through multiple layers of analysis provides an increased richness to the end analysis and synthesized narrative. Another approach that builds upon the functional model can be found in the work of James Paul Gee. Gee examines stories both for their structure but also places attention on the emphasis used during the story. The tone of the story can reveal important data regarding how participants construct meaning. For example, taking a passive versus active voice in a story may reveal something about the participant's positionality. It is also important to recognize that stories are socially and culturally situated and this element can either enable or discourage how a story is told. Therefore, understanding the cultural context in which these stories are told is essential. The emphasis that a storyteller places on certain words or phrases can provide data regarding the emotionality and significant to the teller. Taking into account Mishler's (1999) perspective of narrative inquiry as co-constructed endeavors, the data analysis process must also be cognizant of the researcher's role in the construction of the narrative with participants.

Given this study's focus on empathic understanding and perspective taking through video game narratives, data analysis utilized an approach discussed in Poindexter (2002), which uses a modified version of Gee's emphasis model paired with Mishler's attention to the researcher's role in the co-construction of the narrative. Much like other structural models of narrative analysis,

transcription will examine idea units, lines, and stanzas, but Gee’s approach involves also identifying the complexities within the narrative including emphasis, tone, pitch, and pauses (Gee, 1991; Poindexter, 2002). A transcription key as found in Poindexter in Figure 3.1 will be utilized.

Gee Transcription Key

CAPS	Vocal emphasis
?	Rising intonation or pitch glide
.	Falling intonation or pitch glide
l.	Utterance broken off
=	Successive utterances with no gap
[ ]	Interviewer utterances
{ }	Author explanations
{p}	Short pause
{P}	Long pause
/	Separates idea units/phrase with 1 pitch glide
hard return	Indicates a line, or one topic
blank line	Separate stanzas, or paragraphs

**Figure 3.1** – Gee Transcription Key (Poindexter, 2002)

Data analysis occurred in an ongoing process. Collected data from audio/video recordings and collected images were important into Nvivo, qualitative data analysis software. During the transcription process, particular attention was given to the emotional emphasis participants used in their responses using the framework of Gee (as cited in Poindexter, 2002). This study is interest both in the thematic and structural analysis of student narratives. For the thematic analysis, preliminary codes were assigned during the data transcription process. Coding processes were used to assign and reassign codes in the data. These codes were probed over multiple passes to generate categories, patterns, and eventually themes (Saldaña, 2013). These themes were analyzed using the theories of situated learning and identity.

During the data analysis process, it is important to consider indigenous meanings as well as indigenous contrasts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). From a literary perspective, often meanings are constructed through differences or what something is not. Therefore, the analysis process may prompt additional meetings and conversations as the participants contribute to the analytical narrative. Part of the role for narrative researchers is to interpret participant stories and to synthesize these stories into their own narrative format. Just as Poindexter (2002) found analyzing data by creating poetry stanzas from participant stories as valuable, narrative inquiry is not only a methodology but also a means of data analysis (Kramp, 2004). Therefore, my data analysis will involve the co-construction of a synthesizing narrative that interprets and creates meaning from participant stories. Just as I am interested in participants' use of storying in various mediums, I too will explore that dimension through analysis, which can provide a much richer analysis and interpretation.

Narrative inquiry aims to understand the world as it is storied, which often involves analyzing narratives for coherence, order, characters, form, strings, and structure (Chase, 2010; Poindexter, 2002). Narrative analysis views stories as ways of knowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Coulter & Smith, 2009), and I believe my own constructions of meaning have place in my analysis. Squire (2008) explored the experience-centered approach to narrative instead of treating personal narratives as event-centered. For example, elements of a narrative that do not focus on a particular event but are still “significant for the narrator’s story of ‘who they are’,” are more adequately addressed by focusing on the experience (p. 41). In addition, an experience-centered approach takes into account issues of representation in that stories can carry multiple meanings that can fluctuate with retellings and that interactions between the narrator and listener creates a co-construction of narratives.

### **Trustworthiness**

In the use qualitative techniques such as narrative inquiry, the establishment of trustworthiness of the study must be address. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993)

discuss this concept of trustworthiness as coined by Lincoln and Guba. Trustworthiness refers to multiple qualities which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Trustworthiness essentially encapsulates the concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, objectivity as they are presented in a more quantitative methods. Based upon the adapted work of Lincoln and Guba, the following techniques will be utilized to address the issues surrounding trustworthiness. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), naturalistic research “must demonstrate its truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions,” (p. 29).

**Credibility** deals with whether the research findings reflect “truth” for the participants and adequately reflects the context under which the study was conducted. In order to ensure the credibility of the data and interpretations, efforts to achieve data triangulation were put into place (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Erlandson et al., 1993). Multiple methods of data collection including interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifact analysis provided a greater opportunity to accurately work toward understanding student meaning making through video game narratives. Achieving triangulation through the use of multiple sources of data provides credibility to a study. Information relevant to developing an understanding of a phenomenon must be supported by another source of information, never depending upon a single source of data for interpretation. Follow-up meetings with several participants regarding their experiences were utilized. In particular, member checking occurred by allowing participants to review transcripts and to check interpretations for accuracy and clarity. These member checks occurred at the various stages of research in order to achieve reliability throughout the process.

**Transferability** refers to the extent by which the findings of a study can be applied to alternative contexts. The use of thick description and detail when describing and depicting narratives and the research findings provides a specific context of the study to be formed. As noted previously, purposive sampling was implemented in this study which provided the specific

context explored through this study. Purposeful sampling allows the research to focus on emerging insights in regard to what is of relevance and importance to the study for establishing transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993). **Dependability** refers to ensuring the consistency of the findings from the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). **Confirmability**, on the other hand, refers to the ability for an external reviewer to make judgements about the neutrality of the work and that data can be linked back to the sources. For both dependability and confirmability, careful documentation of interview and observation notes, coding, and data analysis process will help to ensure that I have conducted the study in a dependable and consistent manner. Achieving dependability confirmability can occur by performing audits throughout the research process (Erlandson et al., 1993; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Narrative inquiry asks participants to share stories. Sometimes the stories they are being asked to share may cover a challenging topic that is difficult to discuss from an emotional and privacy standpoint. The question of ownership and control of the stories shared emerges an important consideration in the context of narrative research (Gready, 2008). Representativeness of the stories, their interpretation, and how those stories are shared in the research carry important ethical implications in a study such as this.

The protection of participant privacy and confidentiality also represents an important ethical consideration. The use of member checks and follow-ups with the participants throughout the research process helped to ensure that the narratives and information being shared in this study are both accurate and appropriate based upon the participant feels comfortable having included in the analysis. Any piece of data or analysis that participant does not wish to be part of the final project will be removed according to the participant's wishes.

Due to the time intensive nature of conducting interviews and observations with participants, compensation was used as a reward for participation, but the value of this compensation was set to a level that would not be considered an undue influence. Study

completion cannot be used as a condition for compensation as that is a form of undue influence. Therefore, a system for partial and full compensation was established and was made clear to participants along with their informed consent explaining that they could end their participation at any time.

### **Limitations**

Riessman (1993) notes, “There is a tension in narrative studies between generalization, on the one hand, and the ‘unpacking’ of speech and close attention to narrative form, on the other,” (p. 70). By their very nature, narrative studies depend upon deep, rich data coming from a select and limited participant pool. Generalizability is not a primary concern in qualitative analysis, but it does serve as a limitation. The findings of this study will hopefully provide a more in-depth look at how students interact and construct meaning from video game narratives and to explore the educational implications of those meanings. However, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) caution against the illusion of causality in narrative inquiry research. During the interpretation process, the researcher must differentiate the story-as-told vs the story-as-lived.

A limitation specific to this study stems from the concept of empathy and how participants construct meaning from video game narratives. Based upon the design of this study, it may not be possible differentiate whether participant situated meanings come from a pre-existing propensity for experiencing empathy. While this study does not attempt explore a causal relationship between engaging with narrative-focused video games and the development of empathy, it is possible that a participant predisposed to having empathetic reactions could influence how they perceive and interpret emotional content and contexts in interactive video game narratives.

*Gone Home* was originally released in 2013 on PC (the Playstation 4 version released 2016 but no content changes were made). It was the first game released by the independent game studio Fullbright, and the game was well-received nearly universally among gaming critics and reviews. The game received of publicity in the gaming press, and the game became well known

among visitors to gaming websites. As of June 2018, *Gone Home* on PC has as a Metacritic (<http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/gone-home>) score of 86 out of 100 based upon reviews by 56 game review websites. The User Score on the Metacritic.com stands at a 5.4 out of 10 based upon 2077 player reviews. Player criticism ranges from complaints about the game's price in comparison to its length, the lack of perceived gameplay ("it's not even a game"), and problems with the fact that the game features lesbian characters. While the game was originally released five years ago, media coverage and negative perceptions of the game spread through spoilers on gaming discussion boards have resulted in the game becoming well-known, for better or worse.

It should be noted that many other narrative-focused games feature greater levels of player choice and consequence than what is present in *Gone Home*. The presence of choice and consequence could lead to players feeling more invested in the game's narrative. While this could be a potential limitation, *Gone Home* was selected specially because of the personal story that it tells and the themes it addresses.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS - IDENTITY STORIES AND CONNECTIONS

Katie turns the corner in the attic, the spotlight of a desk lamp illuminating a green book in the distance. As she approaches the green journal on the table, she notices the handwritten label on the cover, “Letters to Katie.” Locked away in the attic, she would finally find out what happened to her sister, Sam. She slowly opens the cover and begins to read:

*Katie... I'm so sorry. That I can't be there to see you in person. That I can't tell you all this myself. But I hope, as you read this journal, and you think back, that you'll understand why I had to do what I did. And that you won't be sad and you won't hate me and you'll just know... that I am where I need to be. I love you so much, Katie. I'll see you again. Someday. Love, Sam.*

The screen slowly fades to black and the music swells, and Lauren sits back in her chair and turns to me. “*I've got chills.*” Lauren had just finished the game *Gone Home* where she played as Katie returning home to find her sister and the rest of her family missing. As Lauren explored the house, she, as the player, would occasionally hear audio recordings from Sam’s journal that she wrote as if writing directly to her sister, Katie. However, Katie, as the character, would not discover these journal entries until she found them in the attic at the conclusion of the game. Later during our interview, Lauren explained:

*I think everything like made sense after I saw that [green book] because I wasn't sure how I was getting all the letters from Samantha in the first place, I think {?}. And I think after I saw that everything clicked like she had been through the house, she had all these*



*thoughts and then she found all of her answers. And I just knew that after the game she opened up the book and that's when she finds out that her sister's gone. She hadn't known what I'd known, I had known at up to that point.*

Lauren's comments at the conclusion of *Gone Home* highlight Gee's theory that multiple identities are "in play" while playing a video game. Lauren, as the player, had known information that the character she played as, Katie, did not know. In fact, the character of Katie also "knew" information that Lauren did not initially know. Katie would share her own virtual thoughts and memories in the form of text to the player as the player interacted with the various objects in the game environment. In this sense, as Lauren plays the game, she is neither fully herself or the character she embodies but rather a hybrid of identities that allow her to understand and make sense of her experiences. This chapter will examine participant's concepts of identity while playing *Gone Home* and other narrative-focused video games as evidenced by their shared stories and personal connections to the game.

### **Research Approach**

Students from a Midwestern, state university were invited to participate in focus groups examining their broad perspectives regarding narratives in video games, memorable moment from games they have played, and what attracts them to video games. Two focus groups were initially conducted early in the process on two consecutive evenings. A third focus group was held after most interviews had been completed to identify additional participants for the full study. Each focus group consisted of 8-10 students. After completing each focus group, audio recordings were reviewed looking for participants that would be invited to participate in the gameplay observation and interview portions of the study. Full participants were selected based upon their ability to cohesively share their experiences and their willingness to share stories with the investigator and other members of the focus group. In particular, students who were able to clearly articulate their thoughts and could reflect upon their previous experiences were later contacted. While some focus group members were fairly quiet and did not have a lot to

contribute, others would meander and go off on multiple tangents making it difficult for others to share their perspective. After each focus group was completed and reviewed, potential participants were emailed the week following to see if they were interested in participating further.

Five participants were ultimately selected from the focus groups or from referrals made during those focus groups. Table 4.1 details general information for each of these participants. Information regarding each participant’s siblings was included due to the importance of sibling relationships that emerged over the data collection process.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Siblings</b>
Lauren	18	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester Freshman	Multimedia Journalism	Older brother
Mariah	18	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester Freshman	Psychology	Older brother, twin brother
Mikey	19	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester Freshman	Computer Science*	Adopted younger sisters
Colin	19	3 <sup>rd</sup> Semester Sophomore	Aerospace Engineering	Older sister, older brother
Jeremy	19	2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester Freshman	Zoology	Older brother, younger sister

\*recently changed from Agricultural Education major

**Table 4.1** – Participant Demographics

Full participants listed above were scheduled two to four weeks following the conclusion of their respective focus group based upon their schedule availability for the gameplay observation. Participants were observed playing the game *Gone Home* while recording their gameplay with a picture-in-picture recording of each participant’s face while playing. I watched each participant play through the game, periodically asking questions in response to player actions during the game and reactions to in-game discoveries. Participants were also instructed to utilize the PlayStation 4’s share feature to take screenshots of moments in the game that were

considered significant or meaningful to them. *Gone Home* contains a number of journal entries that play as voiceovers from the character Sam that player can find in the game. Players are not required to find all of these journal entries. While these voiceovers do represent one of the core means in which the story of the games is told, and there are number of objects spread all across the game environment that also provide additional context and nuance to fully understand the game. However, the number of journal entries found in the game and the time spend playing serve as one means of tracking how thorough players were during the game (see Table 4.2).

<b>Journal Entry Title</b>	<b>Colin</b>	<b>Jeremy</b>	<b>Lauren</b>	<b>Mariah</b>	<b>Mikey</b>
<i>A Very Long Phase</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Adjusting to the Dark</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>At the New House</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Best-Laid Plans</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Big Gold Star</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Daniel</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Dealing with Roots</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Dedication</i>	X	X	X	X	
<i>Default Friends</i>	X	X	X	X	
<i>First Day of School</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Getting Lonnie</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Hanging Out with Girls</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>I Can Sing</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>I Said Yes</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>In the Attic</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>It's Different Now</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Just Gone</i>	X			X	X
<i>Letter's to Katie</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Lie-to-Mom-and-Dad Situation</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Life Moves On</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Ship Date</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Stick with the Group</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>The Nunnery</i>			X		
<i>There Was Nothing Wrong</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Total Journals Found:</b>	23/24	16/24	23/24	23/24	20/24
<b>Total Time Played (in hours):</b>	1:45	1:25	1:54	2:02	1:31

**Table 4.2** – Journals found and play time for each participant

The interview portion of the study was scheduled typically one to two weeks later after gameplay video were reviewed and screenshots collected printed. The individual interviews asked

participants questions regarding *Gone Home* in the first half and questions about their other gaming experiences in the second half. Data analysis occurred in an ongoing manner while data was collected from each participant while new observations and interviews were conducted.

### **About *Gone Home***

*Gone Home* is a game that tackles the themes of loneliness, regret, rejection, discovery, and ultimately what one would do for love when the world doesn't seem to understand or accept you. As a fair warning to anyone who may have interest in playing this game, this is your official spoiler warning as the game's full narrative will be explored extensively in this chapter. Taking place in 1995, the story focuses on a 17-year-old girl, Samantha (Sam) Greenbriar, who begins to embrace and accept that she is attracted to the same sex. Many of these feelings emerge when she meets a rebellious girl named Lonnie DeSoto. The friendship that develops between Sam and Lonnie evolves over time. The game gives voice to a marginalized group during a time in America when same-sex relationships were not well accepted or understood among the general public.

As players take on the role of Kaitlin Greenbriar (Katie for short), Sam's older sister, they explore the house trying to uncover the story of what happened to Katie's family when she returns to an empty house. As the player picks up various objects of significance to the story, a voiceover plays of Sam reading one of her journal entries that had written as if she were talking to her sister. It is not revealed until the very end of the game that the player has actually been playing the game in a flashback. Once the character Katie find Sam's book of letters to her in the attic, Katie begins to think back on what she had found in the house and begins to make connections between things she found while exploring and the entries found in Sam's journal.

For the sake of providing the unfamiliar reader with some additional context to help understand the discussion covered throughout this chapter, I will provide a brief summary of Sam's story from the game. This represents a limited view of the game's full narrative that involves many things outside of the Sam and Lonnie dynamic, but it will certainly help to make

things clearer. During the year that Katie is away in Europe, the Greenbriars move into a house that Terry Greenbriar, the father, recently inherited from his uncle. Sam, no longer with her sister around to talk to, begins to keep a journal of her experiences during this period of time. Sam has a difficult time adjusting to her new school because the house she has moved into has a bad reputation as being the Psycho House, due to the reclusive nature of her great uncle. Friendships do not come easy for Sam during this time. However, she notices a girl named Lonnie who plays video games at the 7-11 convenience store in town. She is immediately intrigued by this girl and feels that she has to meet this “kind of punk” looking girl. She builds up the courage to play her at the arcade game after school, and when Lonnie discovers that Sam lives in the Psycho House, Lonnie wants to see what it’s really like. When Lonnie comes over to visit Sam at the house, they hit it off and start a friendship that helps Sam to feel more connected. Lonnie introduces Sam to the genre of music associated with the Riot Grrrl movement that completely changes Sam’s outlook on life. As they hang out and attend concerts, their friendship builds over time. However, Sam has known for a while that she feels more attracted to girls, but has not expressed this with anyone. As Sam and Lonnie spend more and more time together, they discover that their friendship has become more serious. Through a series of awkward teenager encounters, they begin a romantic relationship in secret from everyone else. With Lonnie planning to join the Army and Sam hoping to go to college to pursue writing, something she shares with her father and grandfather, the two realize that their lives are eventually going to diverge but plan to have fun together while they still can. Sam and Lonnie begin creating a zine that attempts to empower girls to fight the patriarchy, and this gets them both in trouble at school. Sam’s parents find out about her relationship and are less than supportive. Sam and Lonnie are not able to see each other as much at that point, but before Lonnie was about to ship out, Sam’s parents head off to a couples retreat which gives the two of them some final moments together before they go their separate ways. However, Lonnie realizes that the path she has chosen, one that does not involve Sam in her life, is not the life she thought she wanted. She doesn’t go through with her intent to

join the Army and she asks Sam if she could just leave everything behind and runaway together so they can truly be happy. Sam says yes and runs off, but not before leaving her letters to Katie behind so she would know what happened to her when she returns home. I will point out that this is perhaps an overly simplified synopsis of Sam and Lonnie's story that the player will uncover in a nonlinear manner. There are substantial details and nuances to the story players will discover through choosing how to devote their attention and the interpretations they make of what they find. For the purposes of establishing a base narrative, I believe this will provide enough context to make sense of the general analysis that occurs throughout this chapter.

However, the relationship that develops between Sam and Lonnie is not the only story present within *Gone Home*. The attentive player will also better understand the Greenbriar parents, Terry and Janice, as well as their connections and relationships to other characters. The game utilizes a technique known as environmental storytelling in which the environment of the game can reveal details and nuances of what took place in the game (Smith & Worch, 2010). These details can complement or provide additional context to the more explicit aspects of the games story that consists of the player finding pieces of Sam's journal describing important events in her life. Sam writes these journals as if she is talking to her sister during Kaitlin's absence while studying abroad in Europe. As noted previously, the Greenbriar family has moved to a new house during this time. Players, in the role of Kaitlin, explore the Greenbriar house that is entirely new to Kaitlin and so the player and the character of Kaitlin uncover details that are new to both of them. One of the best ways to help explain how the game works and explore how the player may attempt to situate lived experienced within the game narrative is to share one my experiences while playing the game. Additionally, the experiences that others have shared online are compared with my own to provide additional context for the types of experiences being examined through this study. While the main story of *Gone Home* focuses on the character Sam, the player may also develop a better understanding regarding the experiences of Sam's parents

Terry and Janice. Aspects of Terry's story stood out to me and will provide a starting place for examining the experiences of the participants.

### **My Storied Experience of Gone Home: Terry's Tale**

Making my way through the apparently abandoned house, I find childhood memories and scraps of information about what happened to my family as I play as Kaitlin Greenbriar and see the world through her eyes. As the player and as the character Kaitlin, this house is new to both of us as my family had moved here while I traveled abroad in Europe over the last year. Soon I stumbled upon what I could only imagine to be my father's study. An old-fashioned typewriter sat upon a nicely organized desk with crumpled balls of paper lining the floor near the wastebasket. It appeared that my father had been working on another stereo equipment review, but the fact that this review remained unfinished in the typewriter suggested to me that he might be struggling with his writing. Glancing up at the bulletin board, it is filled with a barrage of yellow sticky notes with ideas for continuing his storyline about a fictional government agent who travels in time to save John F. Kennedy from assassination. In fact, a JFK conspiracy book sits in the desk chair nearby. Soon I would discover that my father aspired to be a science-fiction writer, but his published works were essentially commercial flops. Apparently Kaitlin knew these details about her father, at least in a general sense, but I as the player did not. I learn this because as I moved the cursor over a copy of Terry's book on the bottom shelf in the living room, text appears on the screen informing me, the player, that Kaitlin recognizes the book as "It's that book dad wrote" with a note from Terry's friend offering him a job writing audio equipment reviews.

It wasn't until much later into my exploration of this impossibly large house that I learned more about Terry Greenbriar. Resting on a table in the basement of the house is a copy of Terry's first novel with a letter taped to the back. It's from Terry's father, Richard Greenbriar. Discovering this story element is not required to progress in the game. In fact, it's easily missed especially if you don't turn on the lights in the basement. Because I chose to pick up that particular copy of Terry's book, though I had seen multiple copies scattered all across the house

(including a large box full of his unsold books hidden in a cabinet in the library), I experienced a new thread of the narrative that gave me new insights into this person. Figure 4.1 shows the letter I discovered from Kaitlin's grandfather to her father:

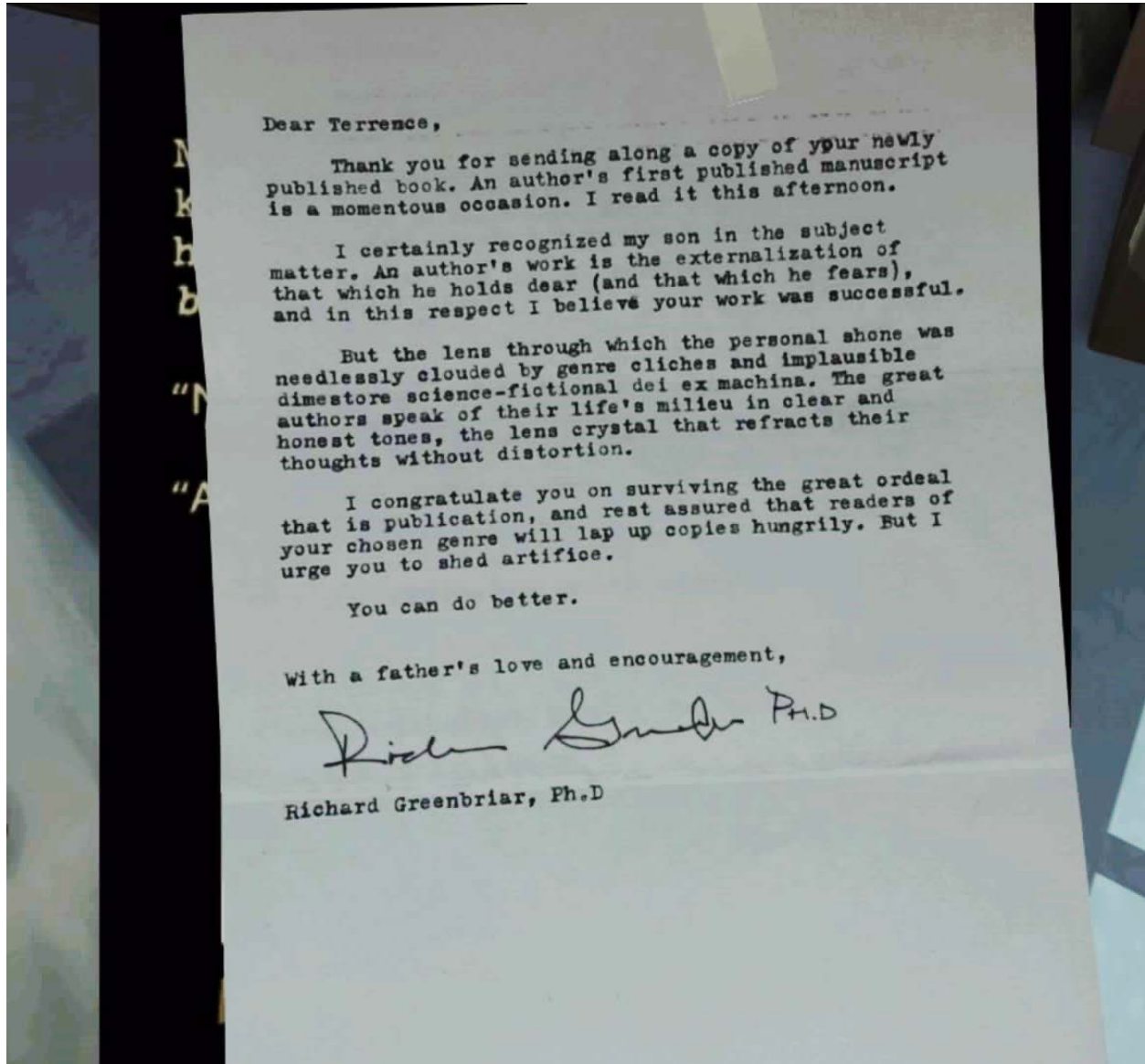
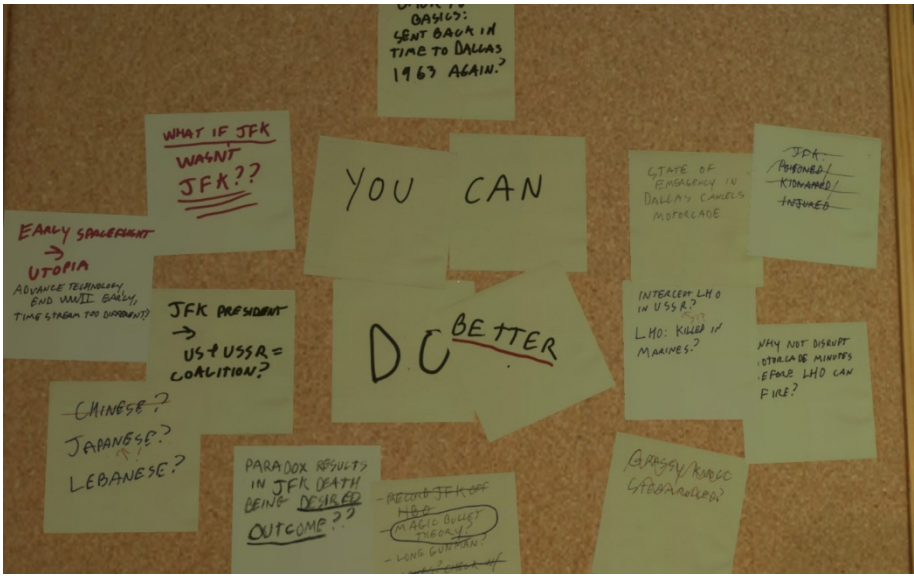


Figure 4.1 – A letter of “encouragement” from Terry’s father

It was at that moment, my mind flashed back to the bulletin board (Figure 4.2) hanging in Terry’s study. The words I thought that were meant to motivate and encourage him were actually the very words that haunt him. “You can do better.” I felt like I had been punched in the gut. I have always depended and relied upon the support of my parents for the choices I have made. I



understood Terry Greenbriar in that moment, and the burden that he carried with him through his life. There was more to this man than I first realized. Suddenly the portrait of Terry's father lying



**Figure 4.2** – Terry's bulletin board: "You Can Do Better"

on the floor of the basement with a gaping hole where his face used to be made sense. Even though the game never revealed what happened to this portrait, my

imagination again attempted to connect the pieces and constructed a narrative to help me make sense of what I experienced.

As illustrated through this example, the game never telegraphs its narrative. The player is allowed to uncover as much or as little as he or she likes. But even then, every detail is not spelled out for the player. It requires the player to make connections to the pieces that they discover. For example, entering a room littered with empty shot glasses and whisky bottles speaks to the struggles Terry Greenbriar faced. How did I know that it was Terry who struggled with drinking? I had to pay attention to the details and small clues found in the house such as a bottle of Irish whisky hidden on top of a bookshelf in Terry's study. The game never told me that he might have a drinking problem, yet I reached that conclusion on my own based upon what the environment I now inhabited revealed to me. Another player may or may not reach that same conclusion. The exploration and discovery required me to connect the dots as it were. However, I am not alone in how the experience of *Gone Home* resonated with me and left a mark. In an

article written on a PC gaming website, Meer (2013) shared his reflection and reaction to this particular story element referencing the letter that Richard Greenbriar wrote to his son Terry:

*In that one letter, Terry's entire personality and every mistake he ever made – and quite clearly continued to make – was explained. I winced, and I remembered. My relationship with my father isn't like that now, isn't hung around my achievements or lack thereof, but it was, and it still hurts a little, no matter how far we've come from it, no matter that my dad now entirely accepts and respects that I've somehow made a career out of my nerdy childhood interests rather than the maths and mechanics he pushed me towards. He was never as stuffy or as cold as Terry's mirthless, aloof father seems, but put it this way – he once gave me a maths textbook as a birthday present, in response to falling grades. I felt Terry's agony, felt the rejection he suffered, felt his struggle to anchor himself in life, felt his struggle for approval. I felt the contempt of his father, and it hurt.*

Of note here is how Meer connected his own lived experience to those experiences he had in the game. His wording highlights the emotional pain that he felt through his use of *wincing*, *agony*, *suffered*, and *struggle*. The focus of this brief narrative centers on a man's relationship to his father. Interestingly, just as Terry may have struggled for approval in the eyes of his father, Samantha certainly experienced a struggle to find acceptance and approval from her father (and mother for that matter).

A common internet meme suggests that one should never read the comments left in response to online posts. One of the difficulties in using discussion board postings and written articles such as this, is the inability to inquire about other elements of my research questions. Certainly powerful narratives may resonate with a person for a variety of reasons that connect with their lived experience, but one of the core differentiating characteristics of video games from other narrative mediums such as film or literature is the interactive nature of the experience (Jones, 2007).

Even with those difficulties, I have found that reading discussion threads for articles about *Gone Home* to be invaluable in learning more about how people have responded and made sense of their own experiences within the game. People, unprovoked, sharing their stories about how they connected with the game's narrative popped up frequently in my searches. One particular comment, however, left me utterly stunned. Wide-eyed, mouth agape, "am I seriously tearing up?" stunned (for lack of a more elegant description of my reaction).

A user by the username of *HKEY\_LOVECRAFT* posted his response to this particular story thread within the game (The following comes directly from <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/08/16/gone-home-a-tale-of-two-dads/#comment-1327513>):

*This part of the story really hit home with me as well, though for altogether different reasons. Here are the four 'notes' that I have from my father which, together, probably constitute the most writing he had ever produced in his life. (He considered written communication impractical.)*

*"For my son, on his 12th birthday – 9 April 1983. Fill this with wonder, and never stop learning."*

*– Written in black Sharpie on the underneath of a bookcase he built for me. I didn't find those words until 2004 while unpacking from a move.*

*"That's more like it!"*

*– Written on the protective plastic sleeve of my 6th grade individual school photo. He was pleased that I smiled in this picture, which was an oddity for me. Found when I woke up the morning after bringing it home, next to his black Thermos-brand lunchbox. He worked the night shift and we rarely saw each other.*

*"I was never able to forgive myself. I hope you will be able to."*

*– Written on the upper-half of a torn piece of paper of unknown origin. I found this in his tool shed, three weeks after he committed suicide, 27 January 1997.*

*“You have given me pride unimaginable!”*

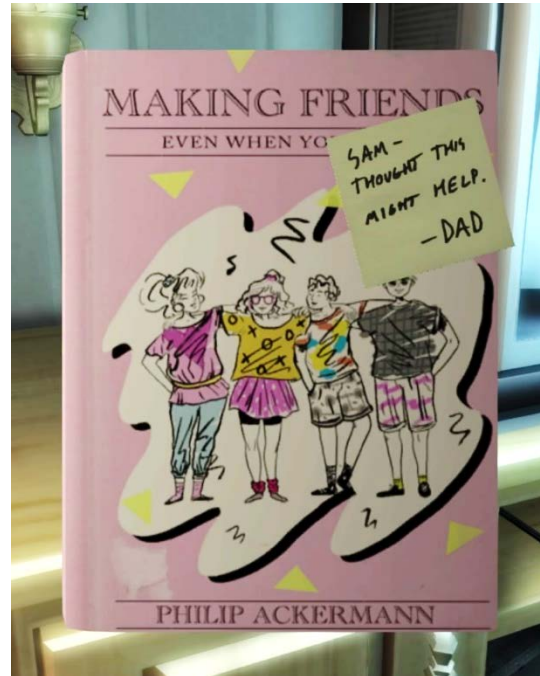
*– Written on the back of the frame in which my parents had placed my Foreign Language Diploma earned while in the Army, circa 1990. Salvaged from the black husk of my childhood home a week or so after it had burned down (Mother’s Day, 1997).*

*HKEY\_LOVECRAFT*'s story is presented in four short vignettes that provides some insight into how he made sense of a smaller aspect of *Gone Home*'s larger narrative. Analyzing this short narrative posted in the discussion section in response to Meer's online article provides some insight regarding how this particular player constructed meaning from this specific story thread from *Gone Home*. His narrative uses brief quotes from his father followed by his own reflections, which provide the context and, arguably, the emotional impact of the overall narrative. The author pinpoints specific dates within his narrative as they are certainly very significant moments from his life, but he purposefully brings the audience's attention to these dates. The short timeframe between his father's suicide and the burning of his childhood home also provide some emotional weight to his narrative. The imagery used in his short narrative is quite evocative. The context in which this story is shared is perhaps one of the most fascinating elements given that he chose to share such a personal element of his own life on a PC gaming website. Of particular note here is that he included a note that he rarely got to see his father, which highlights the sort of relationship that he had with his father. Yet the notes that are left by his father potentially allude to a longing for something more than what he was able to provide for his son. We don't get a good sense of what the poster's relationship with his father was like outside of the context of these notes, but there is a sense of regretfulness in his father's words and deeds.

The picture in Figure 4.3 from *Gone Home* provides an example of the sort of notes that Terry Greenbriar would leave for his daughter Sam. While Terry tried to reach out to his daughter, ultimately he wasn't able to give her the kind of support that she really needed. This parallels in part the similar experience of *HKEY\_LOVECRAFT* as he uncovers notes from his father. As will be seen as the specific research questions of this study are explored, this book

titled *Making Friends: Even When You're Shy* came up frequently during the gameplay observation sessions and sparked some thoughtful and emotional reactions from participants.

These examples support the notion that players may connect their lived experiences with the experiences they encounter in games. One of the core questions being examined in this study is how college students may situate their real experiences and their virtual experiences. This question is examined both in the context of *Gone Home*'s interactive narrative as well as the



**Figure 4.3** – The *Making Friends* book left by Terry to Sam

experiences players have had in other video games they have played. Thematic and structural analysis was conducted on the narratives from interviews, gameplay observations, and the screenshots captured during each participant's playthrough of *Gone Home*.

### **Personal Connections with Interactive Narratives**

By attempting to better understand how college students situate their own lived experiences, stories, and identities within story-driven video game narratives, moments when student discussed their personal experiences in the context of the game were identified. Examining how students situate their own perspectives can provide insight into how learning may unintentionally occur through narrative video games that tackle serious and relatable aspects of human existence. All participants in this study actively situated the events of the game into their own experiences. To put it in the terms of Piaget, they assimilated the experiences within the video game to fit within the context of their lived experiences. Throughout the gameplay observations and during the individual interviews, students were attempting to make sense of the virtual world through their real world experiences. Exploring specific case moments provides the

best insight into how situated learning theory applies. Moments surface when students shared stories relating their own experiences to the experiences of characters in the game *Gone Home* as well as other games they have personally played, and thematic analysis was conducted on those shared stories. Structural analysis was conducted when appropriate. While some themes emerged across participants, some topics and interpretations were unique to particular participants based upon their specific experiences.

The theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as adapted by Gee (2008b) to apply to video game learning is utilized to understand the connections that participants made while playing *Gone Home*. Gee notes that any learning experience will have some form of content that must be learned. The game *Gone Home* does not focus on teaching this content upfront, with the exception of save for a brief reminder of the basic controls. The players will learn the rest of the content by actually playing the game itself and choosing what details deserve their attention. The content of *Gone Home* is its story through the act of discovery. As Gee argues, video games, *Gone Home* included, focus on establishing the identity that a player will take on while playing. In the case of *Gone Home*, it focuses on establishing the identity of the player as Kaitlin Greenbriar. This concept of identity from Gee's (2008b) refers to "a way of being in the world," (p. 48). This in-game identity is established by both characteristic goals and norms that connect with that identity. Even though players take on the role of Kaitlin Greenbriar, they are given little information at the beginning of the game beyond that Kaitlin is returning home from a year abroad that is relayed through an opening voiceover. Players take on the goal of finding their missing family and uncovering the mystery but also follow particular norms and values that are consistent with the character they play. In turn, the player utilizes these goals and norms that result in the player seeing the world in a certain way and will behave accordingly.

While Gee (2008b) writes about the importance technologies and tools within the game, *Gone Home* provides players with a limited toolset. Players are given an inventory to view items they collect, a journal to review audio diaries found in the game, and a map of the house that

expands as the player discovers new areas. However, given the games emphasis on exploration, players have the ability to pick up, examine, rotate, and zoom in on objects. Gee (2008b) explains that identity and content is mediated through these toolsets that end up determining whether the content is interpreted as meaningful by the player. However, this mediation and meaning making process occurs in specific contexts, which Gee refers to as goal-driven problem spaces. Therefore, learning will occur in the video game “through specific embodied experiences in the virtual world (the player has a bodily presence in the game through the character or characters he or she controls),” (Gee, 2008b, p. 49). The context of *Gone Home* confines the game to the Greenbriar home in the year 1995 and this context represents the space in which players begin to solve the problems present to them in order to achieve the goal of the game (explore, uncover, understand).

In summary, Gee’s Situated Learning Matrix looks at experience and learning through the relationship between identity and content. (Identity < Goals and Norms < Tools and Technologies < Context as Problem-Solving Space < Content). Each participant made personal connects to aspects of *Gone Home*’s narrative or to similar games like it and these connections are examined through the concept of situated learning. In Gee’s application of situated learning theory to video games, the relationship between identity and content is of high importance. Based upon the degree to which participants situated their own experiences as a means of making sense of their experiences in *Gone Home*, it appears to support another Gee (2007, 2011) theory that there are actually three different identities interrelating with each other while playing a video game. As a reminder, these three identities are players’ real-world identity, virtual identity of the character they play as, and projective identity as the player projects aspects of themselves into their characters. This projective identity is of particular importance when examining the connections that participants made while playing.

Each participant also made their own unique connections to the game as they situated those experiences uncovered through gameplay to their own lived experiences. What follows are

select examples of the ways in which each participant personally connected with and situated in-game experiences with their own experiences.

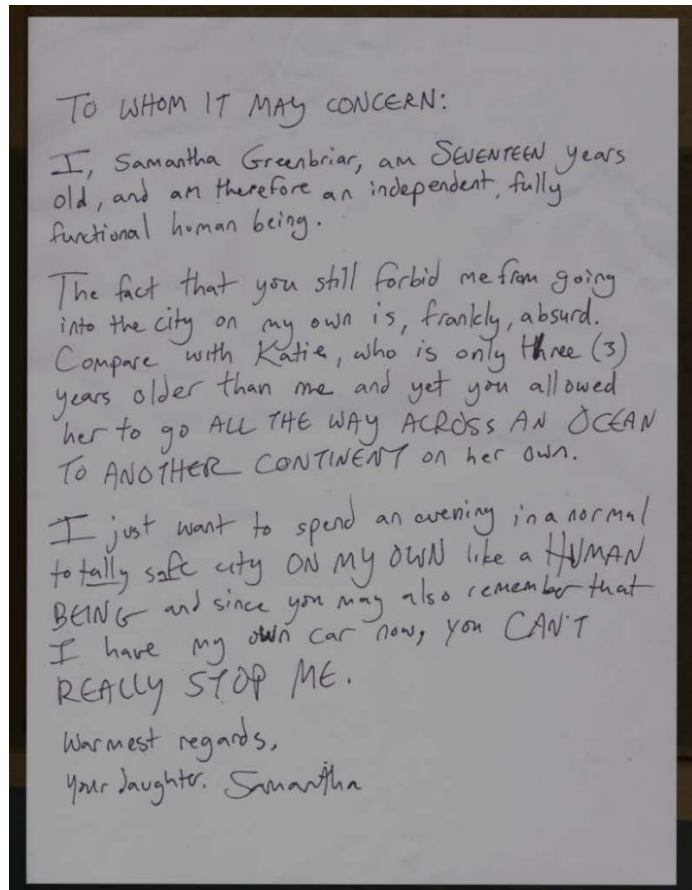
### *Mariah's Connection: "The Angst" in the Sternly-Written Letter*

During Mariah's playthrough, she encountered a bulletin board that was hung just outside of Sam's bedroom. When Mariah read the note that Sam had posted for her parents to see, she laughed and had a strong reaction, joking about all of the teen angst Sam was going through. The letter can be seen in Figure 4.4. During our interview, I asked Mariah why she had such a strong reaction when she read the note.

**Mariah:** *(laugh)* It was just so angsty. I thought it was funny, that she was {p} 'cause I've totally been in this situation where it's like I cannot understand why my

parents don't want me to do this! But then you grow up a little bit and you're like, "Oh my God. I was so dumb." Like when you rewatch *The Little Mermaid* and she's talking to her dad and she goes *(doing Ariel voice)* "I'm sixteen!" And you're like, ugh, you're in love with a boy and you're sixteen. Ugh. Of course your father's not going to let you meet him, like {p} just having like the, the {p} what am I trying to say? Foresight? I guess. I'm realizing like "oh yeah, you're being stupid." Because I've definitely been like "Oof!" Angsty teen and slam the door and like "I ha-, this isn't fair!" Ugh.

**Shawn:** *So what changed? What made you give up your angsty ways?*



**Figure 4.4** – Sam's sternly-worded letter to her parents.



**Mariah:** *Um, they're still inside. Still in here (laugh). You don't give up the angst. Um, uh. I mean realizing that you're being ridiculous is, sort of, the way you have to find that, you know. Like oh, I'm being a little ridiculous here. Um, I'm trying to think of a specific example. Oh, my curfew was always midnight or for a while it was 11:30 and then it was midnight. And I was like, "Ugh. All my friends don't have curfews and I have a curfew, and nyuh. I don't want to be left out." And I, I always had the fear of the FOMO [fear of missing out]. I umph, I had that a lot, I think, uh they were reasonable to give me a curfew. That's a reasonable thing to give a teenage girl, especially one that has a boyfriend and then, you know all this, they were just trying to be, be protective of me, which I understand now. But yeah, having to {p} actually go home and ugh. Yeah, so it's just very teen angst and I've like totally been there.*

Mariah explained that she felt connected with Sam because that character reminded her a lot of herself when she was in middle school and the struggle of figuring out who you are, making friends, and figuring out which friends are the ones you should be hanging out with. The fear of missing out (FOMO) stands out as a personal connection that helped Mariah to understand how Sam may have thought and felt about her parents not allowing her to go to the city. In this way, she projects her own perspective and experiences into the character of Sam to derive meaning of the situation. Mariah made a number of connections with Sam during a similar period in her life as seen in her reflection below:

*Um, (laugh), when Sam was going through her like punk phase. I definitely went through a punk phase, or not punk phase. When I was in middle school I got into like 90's grunge. I don't know. It was kind of random. My math teacher was like, "Hey, here's some cool music that you might like." And I, I had like this whole phase (laugh). And so I started reminding me of myself so like having a past of being an angsty punk teenager, and you know. Um, and that sort of like, "I see myself in that." And um, there was a book of like how to make friends. And I feel like, um, that would be something my parents would have done if I was having that much trouble. They've definitely given something like that to my*

*brother. So I think if I was having trouble they would have definitely found a book for me to read. You know, because my dad's a huge book nerd, and so he would always give me books if {p} he thought I would be into them. And so, I think he'd go out of his way to find a book for me. Also I thought it was cute and 80's looking and it was sad because you don't want to be the person who doesn't have friends.*

As Mariah talks about her grunge phase, the introduction of new music plays an important aspect as she experimented with her style and her sense of self. This parallels aspects of Sam's experience as Lonnie introduced her to a new genre that impacted her outlook on the world. The importance of music to Mariah's identity will be later in this chapter when examining her identity story more directly. Mariah also refers back to the *Making Friends* book (see Figure 4.3) that many participants brought up during their interviews. Her interpretation of this book was situated in that she believed her own parents would do something like that for her if she were having a difficult time making friends.

#### *Lauren's Connection: A Writer Like Me*

Writing is a tool that is used by both Sam and Terry Greenbriar to deal with their feeling and to better understand who they are. While discussing whether Lauren felt that she was approaching the game more as if she were Kaitlin Greenbriar or simply playing as herself, Lauren began to share ways in which she felt connected to the character of Kaitlin. As Lauren played, she would make comments regarding her character as if she were truly Kaitlin Greenbriar. Glancing at the photo of Kaitlin on her passport within the game's inventory, Lauren exclaimed, "I look so young." In these moments she projected herself into the character of Kaitlin. While the game provides significant details regarding who in the Greenbriar family had interests in writing, Lauren, a writer herself, began to insert aspects of her own interests into Kaitlin as she viewed the game through that character's eyes. This process of situating her own interests in how Lauren understood Kaitlin as a character is reflected in in our exchange below.

*I like to write, and like Kaitlin is kind of a writer and the dad's kind of a writer so I found that really interesting. So exploring that and like learning about the rejection of being like published and then they're like dropping you was pretty neat to understand. And that's what I connected with most, I think... but it was kind of cool just to like see the mind inside another person writing a story.*

*The father he would like try to use one story and like use that to make more stories out of one story and keep starting over. And I kind of feel that because you get attached to one story as a writer and you after you finish that, you don't know where you're going to go after that. So, I think he was having a creative burnout after that, and I kind of connected with that. And I understood like his struggle and frustration, and he probably wanted to stop being a writer at some point but I think he's full-time, so it's pretty hard to find something else after that.*

The game never suggests that Kaitlin herself is a writer in the same way that Sam and Terry are depicted. However, writing is an important aspect of Lauren's own experiences and interests that she used to fill in the gaps to develop her own understanding and narrative of Kaitlin. Curious about her interest in writing, I inquired about what kind of stories she would typically write. Lauren explained, *"Um, I used to write a lot in 7th grade about friendships and stuff. And then, it, right now I've been reading and writing about a lot of romance stuff (laugh) basically... Yeah, because I'm at like that point in my life. But, yeah."*

This concept of friendship had emerged in other writings I had seen others produce online, so I inquired further. "In terms of your own experiences writing about friendship and things like that, uh, was there anything going on in your life that spurred the writing about friendship?" I asked Lauren.

*"Um 7th grade, there, like I lived in a really small school and graduated with a class of like 31 or 32, so whenever new kids would like come to our school it was a big deal. And this 7th grade year was this girl, uh, moved into my class and like, it was a really big change in dynamic*

*because I had the same best friend for like 9 years before that, and she kind of like changed it all and she became my best friend, and I lost my other best friend because of that. So I wrote like kind of a book about accepting new people as your best friend and {p} we, we had this connection because she also liked to write so we had this connection of writing together, and I had never had that before. So, that {p} that's kind of why I started writing too. I just don't find many books that I can like relate to like hardcore. And I feel like it would be nice to have that and then I want to give some other girl that in the future. Something like they can relate to 'cause it's like really hard to put your feelings into words, especially like when you're talking one on one, but I find it a lot easier to write it down after hours of thinking about how to write it. So, like I feel that's my main goal is just help another girl that was like in the same situation as me because it was like a hard, it's hard thing to lose your best friend.”*

Here Lauren emphasizes how the small nature of her school had an impact on developing friendships. In small communities, it is common for people from town to claim that “everybody knows everybody” and the introduction of a new student, an outsider, can cause disruption to the middle school network of relationships. This period of time can also be filled with what Mariah called “teen angst” and drama (Clarke, 2003).

When discussing her own family, Lauren exhibited the tendency to situate the experiences Sam went through within her own lived experiences. During our interview, Lauren had markedly different ways of describing her parents. She connected much more with her “nerdy” father and seemingly less with her stay-at-home mother. During her gameplay of *Gone Home*, Lauren had a reaction to finding the *Making Friends* book with the sticky note that read “Sam—Thought this might help. – Dad”. When she found the book and realized that it was from Sam’s parents trying to help her, she reacted with a smirk. I asked her why she reacted the way she did, and she reported, “I think I just thought, like, her mom is really disconnected from her daughter, and she does not know what to do so she looks, and she wanted, she really intended a lot, I think, or...” It was at this moment that she realized that it was actually Sam’s dad who left

the note. “The DAD!” she said with a tinge of surprise in her voice. Even though the note found on the *Making Friends* book clearly informs the player that it was Terry Greenbriar, the father, who wrote the note to Sam, Lauren automatically connected her own relationship with her own parents to make sense of the in-game experience. This tendency to insert her own experiences into the game occurred frequently, especially in regard to how she conceptualizes herself as a writer.

### *Mikey’s Connection: The Affair and Adoption*

The storyline involving Sam and Kaitlin’s mother, Janice, is likely the easiest thread to overlook while playing the game. Clues are scattered throughout the house indicating that Janice is unhappy in her marriage. The game implies that Janice might have a flirtatious relationship with one of her co-workers, whom Janice’s friend from college, Carol, refers to as Ranger Rick. Not all participants picked up on the idea that Jan might be considering having an affair, but Mikey picked up on the clues and explained why he connected so strongly to that aspect of the game’s narrative.

**Mikey:** *I would say the affair bit, {p} because my (stutter) I'm adopted. And my biological parents {p} my uh father he was having an affair on my mom. And so that was {p} cause he was doing stuff on the internet that he shouldn't have been. And when they got divorced, he went straight to Mississippi and was with this new woman. So. Honestly, I was {p} kinda too young to understand. It didn't really affect me. I was living with my mom, but my mom and I got to do pretty much whatever I wanted. I wasn't a very good kid. I'd {p} I just wasn't hanging out with the good crowd, you know. I was, I was a little kid at the time doing things that I shouldn't. Like I would yell at my mom and get in arguments with her when she wouldn't let me do what I wanted. And I'd sneak over to the playground and stuff like that.*

**Shawn:** *Do you feel like you've changed a little bit though?*

**Mikey:** *Since I've been adopted, yeah. But I had known the people that adopted me all my life. They were, uh well, my mom now, I call her my mom, well I call her by her name, but she was my biological mom's best friend in high school.*

**Shawn:** *Do you have much contact with your, with your mom still?*

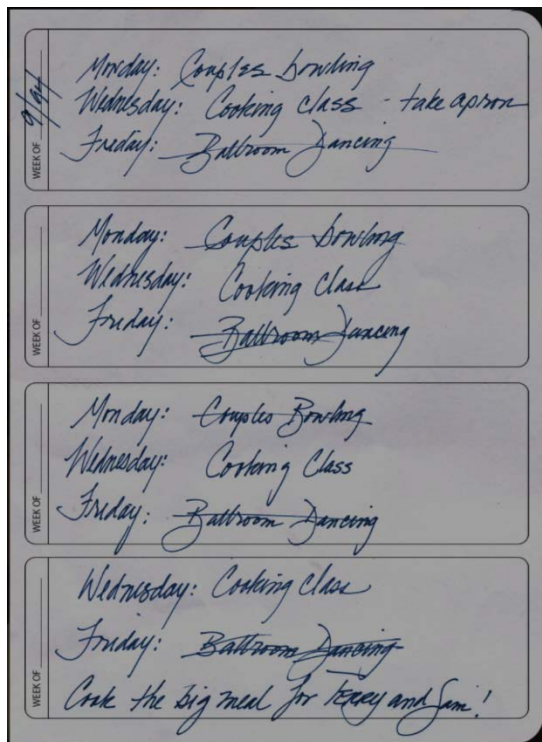
**Mikey:** *My biological mom, uh, she passed away from cancer.*

**Shawn:** *Oh I'm so sorry to hear that. When did that happen?*

**Mikey:** *Uh, it was my {p} 8th grade year, summer. It was between my 8th grade year and freshman year.*

**Shawn:** *Goodness. How, how was dealing with that? Did you stay close to her at all?*

**Mikey:** *I was close, but she became more like a friend. Than my mom. Which was the better relationship for us to have, and it hit me hard, but I was just like she was suffering towards the end so I was just like... We had moved down to Texas, and I hadn't seen her in a while so it was, still... It was still hard but it wasn't as hard.*



**Figure 4.5** – Janice’s weekly planner with various events crossed out.

Even though Mikey notes that he was young when the affair and divorce occurred, this event had a significant impact upon the rest of his life. Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) collected data on children from divorces longitudinally for 25 years. They concluded that the impact that divorce had on children had cumulative negative effects over time. Children of divorce reported feelings of loneliness and a strong loss of parenting. This matched with Mikey’s experience in the years following the divorce as he noted, “I wasn’t a very good kid,” during a period of time when his mom would let him “do pretty much

*whatever I wanted.*” During this playthrough, Mikey discovered Janice’s planner, and while other participants found the same object, Mikey is the only one who captured a screenshot of the planner as something that was significant to him (Figure 4.5). He explained during his observation, *“I noticed that after the first couple’s bowling, uh, they stopped doing it. They got crossed out twice and then they just stopped doing it. I assume they’re having some issues or something.”* He also picked up on several clues that Janice might have been tempted to have an affair with one of her co-workers. Mikey made sense of these in-game moments by drawing upon his own experiences with the issue. At the same time, Mikey began to reflect upon his own behavior of wanting to do what he wanted and describes himself as not being “a very good kid.” For him things changed for the better once he was adopted, where a more stable family dynamic was introduced.

As Mikey plays the game, he situates his own experiences as a means of constructing meaning when he discovers new contexts within the game. *Gone Home* relies upon players to utilize their own logic and powers of observation as a central tool in order to achieve the game’s goal of piecing together the game’s full story. Mikey draws upon this experiences with his parents separating to more fully understand the contextual nuances of the game’s content. In many ways, the experiences that players carry into a game like *Gone Home* may serve as an important set of tools for connecting their in-game identity with the game’s content as a means of deriving meaning and developing understanding.

#### *Colin’s Connection: The Parents’ Approved Child*

During our interview, I asked Colin whether he felt like he connected with any of the characters in the game. In his response he integrates his own experiences as a means of understanding Kaitlin Greenbriar as a character. He also attempted to connect other characters in the game to members of his own family.

*I felt a sort of uh connection between my siblings and the siblings in the game. Of “Oh, this is the perfect child.” This is the child that does this, goes to college, does everything*

*the parents want them to do, parents are VERY happy with them. And then there's the child that's constantly rebelling. Constantly being, being reprimanded and having things taken away from them. And getting that desire to leave as quickly as possible. I have sort of, not quite as a rebellious family, not quite as over-reactive but definitely to a, to a smaller degree that sort of family relationship. I'm sort of {p} Kaitlin more than the other two siblings. My older brother is DEFINITELY Samantha. Definitely doing everything that the parents don't want him to do. Uh, they really didn't want him to be a theatre student where he went, and {p} he, he's now kinda between jobs and definitely, he definitely got away from our home town as quickly as he physically could.*

Colin believed that he connected with Kaitlin the most while playing *Gone Home*. He related their experiences of being off at college. While he hasn't studied abroad for a year like Kaitlin, he acknowledges that he knows how it feels to not be around his family as much as he used to after moving to college. Later in the interview, Colin noted, "I don't spend as much time, you know, back at home with the family there. I stay away. I definitely feel the connection of being very far away from the home but still being the parents' approved child, you know. Like their, their definite, this child did it. Success. I definitely feel that connection."

This notion of success and being the "approved child" ties in significantly to Colin's sense of identity as it emerges throughout his interview and the connections he made while playing the game. This identity of being successful in the eyes of his parents can be seen in particular through a scene that he captured in the game. The scene from *Gone Home* that Colin captured in Figure 4.6 is a small corner of the basement where her parents have stored some of Katie's belongings. This area provides the player with some additional insight into the personality of the character they have embodied throughout the game. Of note in this scene is a first place ribbon which has an emblem of an atom on it, a copy of Katie's reproductive system assignment, and name plaque that uses the first letter of Kaitlin's name to describe her personality.





**Figure 4.6** – Katie’s belongs stored in the basement.

Compared to Sam’s same reproductive system assignment which she wrote as an action spy thriller, Katie followed directions and did what was expected by the teacher.

The idea of being a “successful child” is an important aspect of who Colin perceives himself to be. Colin seemed to latch onto the accomplishments that Katie had achieved, referencing the first place trophies in the foyer and the way that she received top marks on her assignments. He continually made references to all of the things he had accomplished and how he was doing what his parents had envisioned for him. I asked Colin if he could reflect on any particular challenges.

*{p} Not really. I, I, I've always had just the success. You know, I um, {p} I was a scholarship student here. I... I got in extremely easy compared to how I expected it to be here. I {p} had automatic acceptance here and it was, was the easy road, but {p} I, I can connect it with other people in my life, like my brother, actually. He wanted to be an author at first. It was one of the many things he waffled on, but he, he just never could find the inspiration to finish a book. Or to {p} when he did have one finished to like edit it*

*and see if anyone would take it. So I can definitely {p} see the struggle of the author there.*

In this narrative, Colin defers the concept of struggling to his older brother. However, it was discovered later through university directory information that Colin was in fact not enrolled as a college student when he agreed to participate in the study. It would seem that this concept of being the good child who has always found success in comparison to his brother has become an important aspect of his identity. Without access to his academic records, it would simply be conjecture as to what may be occurring with Colin; however, this omission during our interview when we were discussing his success in college does create some questions as to why he might have been less than truthful about his current enrollment as an Aerospace student. One possible explanation could be that a narrative of success has become such an integral part of who Colin believes he is, that he does not want to acknowledge a less than favorable outcome.

Unfortunately, Colin did not respond to requests for a member check to provide him with an opportunity to clarify the matter.

#### *Jeremy's Connection: The Wolf Among Us*

During our interview, Jeremy mentioned how he did not connect with many of the characters during his time playing *Gone Home*. It should be noted that Jeremy seemingly began to rush through the latter portions of the game, which might explain why he had less of a connection than other participants. This is evidenced by observation that he had a significantly quicker playthrough, the number of journal entries he missed compared to other participants, and the fact that he began receiving texts from his girlfriend. However, one particular game that Jeremy connected with on a very personal level was *The Wolf Among Us*. In order for Jeremy's story to make much sense to a reader unfamiliar with the game, I will provide a bit of context.

*The Wolf Among Us* is a graphic adventure game that allows players to make choices throughout the game that will have a lasting impact on future events that play out in the game.

*The Wolf Among Us* utilizes the comic series *Fables* for its source material. In the *Fables*

universe, the fairy tale characters we grew up reading about as children are real. However, a war in their world resulted in these characters fleeing into the human world. These fairy tale characters live in a secret society concealed within the state of New York called Fabletown. Characters who appear less than human either must use expensive appearance changing magic called a glamor or live on The Farm, a country settlement hidden somewhere in upstate New York. The story focuses on the sheriff of Fabletown, the Big Bad Wolf in human form, who goes by the name Bigby Wolf. Snow White is the director of operation for Fabletown and serves the role of assistant to the deputy mayor. While Bigby tries to uphold law and order having put his past transgressions behind him, many of the citizens of Fabletown had forgotten the terrible things Bigby had done in the past.

Jeremy shares a pivotal moment from that game and how his own experience connected. A number of direct parallels between Bigby and himself are made in this story almost to an extent that it is difficult to tell whether the game narrative may be reshaping his perception of his own experiences.

**Jeremy:** *I connect so well with Bigby, with Bigby Wolf just on his reputation and how people see him and how he's treated. And in reality how he really is. You know, you, you sit, I felt like I became Bigby Wolf, while playing through that, the choices I made were as combination of like what I would think and what he would do. A happy medium... I know that not only I would say something sarcastic but so would Bigby. Just because of personality. Um, {p} like the whole deal of him {p} being a kind of gruff looking guy to also being this beast. I connected with that really well. And {p} there were some characters who absolutely hated him and held on to what he did in the past. And there was those who {p} kinda wanted to read into him a little bit more and give him that new chance {p} in their, in their new surroundings. And that, that spoke to me really well. Now granted there were some times, I've done my, I think I'm on my third playthrough of it, and so now I'm at the point to like, I want to see what this option would do. Of what this option would do. Like I've played it how, not only how I and Bigby would play it, but now I want to see*

what are the other ways to take this, and how else does it change the game. But I {p} I will forever {p} I think that's like the one game it will forever go down with me in like {p} just because {p} of how invested I became. That will always be like my top, top 3 games.

**Shawn:** What was the part of the story that you felt like just, just really had an impact on you?

**Jeremy:** Um, {p} the moment where you have, you find Crane with Snow White. And you run into {p} um, Dee and Dum and Bloody Mary. And whether or not you decide to {p} um, kill Dum or



**Figure 4.7** - *The Wolf Among Us*: Bigby Wolf, with a look of shame, looks over at Snow White after killing Tweedle Dum

not. The way, when he was in that form, the way he looked at Snow White [Figure 4.7]. Like he knew that he was this monster and that he was ashamed that she had to see that part of him, and part of him that he'd been trying to lock away.

Um, I made a heavy connection to that because I think I, I, I hadn't even been dating my girlfriend {p} a month {p} I think we got close to a month. But she saw that side of me. She never understood why people called me *The Beast*. But she saw that side of me because {p} there was, we were loading for a football game and none of the freshmen were doing what they were supposed to or they were just doing it wrong. I was telling them, do this, do that. I was starting to get angry. And, you know, I, I had long hair. I had like a skunk tailed beard because part of it just didn't have color. But I mean it was there, and it was, I guess it was one of main intimidating points and another point was like I kept it in, I kept my long, I kept my bangs pretty much in my face. It was to my shoulders and I could have separated it out on the sides that I did sometimes. But when I got mad, they would just fall as I would work. And I was sweaty and they were kinda, I looked terrifying. And when I would carry something, I'd go up on the pads of my toes. So I kinda had that {p} dog leg almost. But {p} it's also, that's also a really good way for balance and everything I found out. But, um, these speakers were about {p} 80 pounds. So I would actually

have to work out to carry these things. I still do a lot of the workouts just because it's healthy, but {p} I got so mad {p} at one of the freshmen {p} actually at a group of them because they were just standing there talking, and I had to constantly yell at them. "Go get this! Got get that!" That I grabbed one of the speakers with one arm, lifted it up and threw it, from the second floor. And one of, one of the band dad's ran over and grabbed it and someone had to get behind and catch him. {p} And just like the look on my face, the yelling I did, the way I bared my teeth, and just my whole entire stance. I looked like a monster. Like something out of that Disney story. And it terrified her. And I didn't know that she was standing there trying to talk to me until a few



**Figure 4.8** - The Wolf Among Us: Snow White's reaction to Bigby Wolf killing Tweedle Dum

minutes after. Like I had to actually jump down and was starting to make my way towards them, and I picked one of them up, and was just like chewing him out. Because he was like the one like distracting everybody. And when I dropped

him, I kinda turned and saw her, and I was, I was heartbroken [see Figure 4.8]. And I was {p} I was embarrassed of myself. I was ashamed of myself. But just overall I was pissed. I was, like you, you idiot. You're trying to do better and you let him back out. You did all this stuff, {p} but there was this moment {p} in like later on in the game where he accepted. And he actually went and turned fully back into the wolf. And {p} when I saw that part that he accepted being The Big Bad Wolf to do his job, to protect everybody, {p} it kind of {p} that's when I really sunk, like those between those areas. Like I was from the start, I can kinda connect this to who I am, I am invested in this character. {p} You know, 'cause there comes a point where I have to have that side of myself. If I don't, um, I lose a lot of my personality.

The parallels between Jeremy's story and *The Wolf Among Us* game's story are striking. From Jeremy's perspective, he and his version of Bigby Wolf are basically one and the same. The

descriptions that he used to describe himself and his mannerisms along with the direct correlations between the scene depicted in the game and story he shared of his own experience of getting angry raises some significant questions. The structure of Jeremy's story matches the overall structure of the scene as it plays out within the game. Bigby is assaulted in an alleyway by Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, transforms into a beastly form, throws heavy objects, ultimately picks up one of his assailants, and turns looking ashamed his love interest, Snow White, seeing her stunned reaction. Jeremy's tale details him becoming angry over freshmen not doing their job. He describes his appearance as a beast with his long hair, baring his teeth, and walking on the pads of his feet like a dog, he throws a heavy speaker in anger, he picks up one of the disruptive freshmen yelling at him, and is surprised to find his girlfriend seeing him behave in such an aggressive way. It appears that this represents a case in which his lived experiences and his sense of identity are situated within the context of *The Wolf Among Us*. Whether the events occur in that way in reality is of little consequence, but his understanding of the events through the lens of Bigby Wolf and his persona of The Beast is what is of significance here.

I asked Jeremy whether he felt he was playing *The Wolf Among Us* more based upon what he thought Bigby would do or what he believed he would do if here were in that situation.

**Jeremy:** *It was a combination of both honestly. I {p} I felt like mine and Bigby's personalities were very close, the first time I played it. Um, I still kinda feel like our personalities um, {p} are kinda similar. Like people {p} if someone's older than me, I tend to connect with them better. And talk to them um, as well as I get there, like a little kid, I don't want to be scary or anything to them. So that moment when he's talking to Toad's kid, {p} um, you could, there was kinda that feeling that okay, Bigby wouldn't actually be trying to petrify this kid. He would wanna try and do all this, and I feel I, I would do the same thing. But when I deal with somebody who was like my age and all this other, or just a year younger, two years younger than me, I'm not very nice to them. I demand respect out of them kinda deal. Um, which I guess is where the whole asshole*

*thing comes from. But I don't know. I just, because of that kinda thing, I felt like me and Bigby had a very {p} corresponding or similar personality structures.*

Jeremy felt that he not only connected his lived experiences in a broad sense to the experiences of Bigby Wolf, but he also felt that he was playing a character that was very similar to his own personality. Similar to other participants, utilizing personal experiences to construct meaning from their gaming experiences appears to be prevalent. The player's learning is situated simultaneously in the context of the game but also within the context of relevant personal experiences. The next section of this chapter explores participant shared identity stories. As will be seen, Jeremy's desire for respect from others emerges again when he reflects on the story of who he is.

### **Identity Stories of the Virtual, Real, and Projective Self**

One of the core intentions of this study was to explore the potential connection that might exist between players' identity and the identity of the character they are playing as. More specifically, the study intended to explore how playing narrative-focused video games may inform a student's concept of personal identity in comparison to their adopted in-game identity. To best understand how each participant conceptualizes their identity, especially when looking at how their real identity interplays with their in-game virtual identity, it is important to examine the stories that these students tell. These brief identity stories represent a piece of their identities. It must be acknowledged that a person's entire identity cannot be captured in a single story, and confusion regarding what exactly makes up one's identity can be seen throughout the stories shared by all of the participants. However, these excerpts do provide insight into who these students are and what they bring with them when taking on the role of a different person within a video game. The struggle that participants had in articulating their concept of identity can be seen throughout these stories, and some participants were significantly more detailed than others. In *Authoring Identity*, Johnson (2012) argues:

Both academic worlds and game worlds, and writing and gaming, demonstrate the odd fact that an entirely constructed identity is not necessarily a false one, and both reveal that such constructed identities have the potential to become, with time and use, as much a part of the self as any other naturally occurring or socially assigned identity. (p. 63)

This position implies that the identities that players take on while playing a video game and their personal conception of identity could become interconnected in meaningful and significant ways. The experiences encountered through the act of taking on a role within a game could potentially allow the player to learn more about themselves and the way they view the world. While players do not directly construct their character when playing *Gone Home*, players are mentally constructing who Kaitlin Greenbriar is over the course of the game. Some video games do provide players with the opportunity to directly create their own characters and roleplay that character in a way that matches their vision of who that character is. For example, Mikey noted that he uses a character named Marshall Smith when he plays a roleplaying video game that represents his ideal of a hero who is good at everything. Mikey, discussing his concept of Marshall Smith, explained:

*I want him to be that cool action hero. Hero being the key word there. I want him to be the one everyone knows. Like when I play Red Dead Redemption, I've tried not to break any of the laws. I go around, in Skyrim, I wouldn't kill any civilians or steal. I would just be that hero.*

In this way, Mikey can play as the character with a unique personality that represents specific qualities of the games he plays. In other games, players may attempt to play the game, as if they are playing as themselves. While players may have a firm concept of their identity when they play video games as if the experiences in the game were truly happening to them, when I asked directly how they conceptualize their identity, participants struggled to find the means to describe their ideas clearly.



### *The Identity Struggle: The Challenge of Describing Our Own Identity*

As participants reflected upon the identity of various characters they had encountered in video games, including their playthrough of *Gone Home*, I explicitly asked each participant, “How would you describe your own identity?” I purposefully asked this question without giving any context of how I would define identity in order to assess how the participants understood the concept themselves. Identity is a complex, multi-layered construct that can be understood from a multitude of perspectives. Even though this study would be examining identity from the perspective of Gee (2000, 2007, 2011), asking this open-ended question allowed the participants to provide their understanding of identity without my own biases influencing their responses. This was quite possibly the most challenging question for participants to answer based upon the long pauses and overall struggle to articulate what makes up their identity. I purposefully left this question broad to see how students would conceptualize their perceived identities. What emerged is the interchangeable use of the terms *identity*, *personality*, and *character*. From the perspective of Gee’s (2000) identity theory, there are four lens in which to examine the concept of identity: Naturally, institutionally, discursively, and through our affinities. Participants focused almost exclusively on aspects of their Discourse Identity when they were explicitly asked to describe their identities. In other words, participants described their identity based upon how other people might reasonably describe them as a means of discourse. For example, Mikey described himself as *happy*, *adventurous*, and *self-conscious*, all of which tend to tap into his overall personality traits. It is through his interactions with others that emerged most for his understanding of identity as opposed understanding his identity in regard to his identity biologically or an identity given to him through institutions, such as being a student at a university.

Similarly, Mariah described her identity as being an art-driven person, creative, and Hufflepuff. The term Hufflepuff stems from the Harry Potter series as one of the Houses of Hogwarts. Lauren explained, “[Hufflepuff]’s a good way to describe myself. Um, all the aspects of that. The loyalty and doing the right thing because it’s good and not because of anything else,

and um, {P} nerdy (laugh). Or I suppose I should say geeky. I'm not nerdy. It's different." This spurred a conversation regarding the difference between nerdy and geeky. When I noted that geeks tend to have a passion for something, Mariah interjected saying, "Yes! Passionate. That would be the way that I'd identify." While Mariah differentiated between the nerd and geek identifier, Colin described himself as a lover of all things nerdy. This concept of geeky or nerdy taps into what Gee describes as Affinity Identity, an identity emerging from shared experiences as a part of a group in a specific practice of interest.

While examples of Discourse Identity emerged when students were asked to describe their own identity, during the interview process, participants would occasionally make references to these aspects of Affinity Identity. Lauren as the writer, Mikey as the gamer, and Mariah as the actress are all examples of an Affinity Identity. While the participants also made references to being a brother or sister, son or daughter, or a college student within the context of the stories they shared over the interview, none of these emerged explicitly when they described how they conceptualized their own identity.

Based upon the descriptions used by participants when describing their identity, they appear to be conceptualizing personality and identity as one and the same. While personality serves as a facet of what makes up one's identity, it provides only a fraction of the whole picture of what makes you, you. This limited perspective on what constitutes one's identity can be seen throughout participants' responses.

One trend observed across participants was the connection to the outsider or outcast identity. Both Lauren and Mariah described themselves as an outsider in the sense that they felt that they didn't fully fit in with what they believed was the typically high school student/now college student. As noted previously, Jeremy connected with Sam's feeling of being a social outcast as Sam moved to a new school when her family moved to Arbor Hill. Jeremy noted that who he feels he is and how others perceive him are notably different (while still being fairly blunt about some of his qualities):

*I think on the outside, like I said, on the outside I'm this {p} this is at least how I feel. On the outside I feel like I'm this very {p} rugged, scary guy because I always look like I'm just absolutely pissed. Or like I'm just ready to hit somebody. But in reality, I'm actually really easy going. I'm very talkative. I'm very outgoing. You know, I, I'm very easy to get, I feel I'm very easy to get along with. Um, {p} you know, I {p} I'm also very, deep down, I'm very caring. Like I, if one of my buddies has a problem, I will sit down and listen to him no matter how long it takes. Like it does not bother me. At all. So I think the way it is like {p} on the outside I'm very scary. But in reality I have a good heart. There's always like {p} basically a diamond in the rough of all of it. I think it's the best way I could {p} really think of it. But I can still be a little narcissistic and a bit of a prick.*

Interestingly, Jeremy views that this caring nature is “*deep down*” as he continues to embrace his inner “Beast.” However, he also feels that if people would give him a chance and not judge him by his appearance, they would see more of the true him.

The following sections provide a brief look at the identity stories that each participant shared during individual interviews when I asked if they could tell a story that would reflect their identity. As a part of narrative analysis, I have used the process of restorying the raw data shared by each of the participants. Restorying involves the process of restructuring raw data stories as a means of establishing causal links among the ideas shared by the participants (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). These stories are restoried from the first person perspective to provide a clear depiction of how participants view their sense of identity narratively. First up is Lauren, who when asked to describe her identity jumped straight into the narrative restoried below.

#### *Lauren's Identity Story – “Finding Unfamiliar Scenarios in Safe Situations”*

*I am Lauren... and when I was young, I felt like anyone I met was my friend. As a kindergartener, I remember this one girl, a grade younger than me, who asked if I would be her friend. I was like, "Sure, you're friend #536" just pulling that number out of my butt. But as I got older, I began reading all these books where the main character was like, "I'm not like other*

girls." And I realized I felt that way too. Coming from a small town with only 30 kids in my class, I felt like I didn't relate to many other people. Eighth grade was a weird friend transitional period for me, and in high school I felt like I had one group of friends the entire year, especially my senior year. I feel like in some ways, I'm kind of a recluse in what I find familiar, and then in other ways I really love finding unfamiliar scenarios in safe situations in video games, books or movies. If I experience it in different ways it feels weird and unfamiliar, but whenever it's in a book it feels okay. So, I feel like I was kind of raised sheltered. I wasn't experiencing the worst things, and I'm not complaining about that at all. But video games, books, and movies usually have these situations where it's not sheltered at all. I'm kind of figuring it out now which is strange because college is so weird. You're living with somebody you don't know, for one, and I'm living in the same building as all of my friends. I stay in their room until like midnight, and then I go five floors down to my room. I don't think I could stay up that late if I was just by myself at the house. I lived in the country and now I live in the city, kind of. I think a lot of my life I just read a lot of books, and I experienced things that way instead of going through it myself. So I feel like being the main character, they're experiencing things first hand, and I don't know if I can relate with it so much. But I think I just wish I could, and I feel like I relate with it because I would read these books as if I was the main character. That's what I do with video games.

Throughout her interview, Lauren discussed how her exposure to media had an important impact on how she conceptualized herself. Her love for books intertwines with so many aspects of her concept of self and identity. Lauren began her story by framing herself in the past as a means of better understand how she views herself in the present. She began to question what she believed to be true and began to adopt an outsider perspective as she began to discover the feeling of "I'm not like other girls." In one way, this mentality echoes the character of Sam Greenbriar, as she writes in one of her journals "it's weird hanging out with girls." Lauren references to the friend dynamic shift that occurred in her life moving into her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year when a new girl moved into her small school. This event in her life emerged multiple times during her interview

and was previously discussed in the context of personal connections she made while playing *Gone Home*. The importance of social connections appears to be a core part of how Lauren defines herself.

From her story she uses the terms *recluse* and *sheltered* as discursive identifiers when examined from Gee's (2000) identity theory. She sees her sense of identity as having shifted over time especially in regard to how she approached friendships. She began to become more selective in who she considered a friend based upon her own realizations that she viewed herself as different from everyone else. Instead of focusing on the quantity of friends, she started to value the quality of those friendships. She still had a network of friends during this period of time, but she began to find more comfort in books other forms of media that allowed her to step outside of herself and experience new things that could not happen in her small home town. Now as a college student (an Institutional Identity), Lauren has begun to understand herself even more through her connections with others.

In the context of how she approaches playing video games, she firmly believes that she tries to play as herself. The idea of "*finding unfamiliar scenarios in safe situations*" is an evocative statement that illustrates how books, movies, and video games allow her to experience new things without the fear of repercussions or sense of danger. Video games and books provide Lauren with an opportunity to experiment with situations outside of those with which she feels comfortable or familiar without the risks associated with doing it the real world. In these moments while engaging with different forms of media such as video games and books that Lauren is able to escape from the confines of what she believes is a sheltered life. Lauren's interest in experiencing new perspectives through books also began to extend to video games where she had more of an active role in the story.

#### *Mariah's Identity Story – "Take Every Opportunity"*

*I am Mariah... and when I was in high school, I was in theatre. I had auditioned for the play "Servant of Two Masters," and I remember thinking that I didn't fit any of the characters. I*

would have rather done another show I just auditioned for; however, when I got called back for “Servant of Two Masters” I thought, “Oh, no. I want to be in the other show.” I went to the director and told him that I had a dentist appointment on the day of call backs. And that wasn't a lie, I actually did. I remember telling him that he should take me out of the running because it would not be fair to the other people if I was in the show. Looking back now, it was kind of selfish of me, but he came back and told me, “You know what? You might not go to call backs, but I'm still going to consider you, because that's how theatre works. It's not necessarily fair.” That really impacted me as a person. Realizing that things aren't fair. I ended up getting the lead, and it was one of my favorite shows I had ever done, and I almost backed out of it. I think that made me realize that I should take every opportunity that's given to me. Whatever my first impression of it might be, it might be different from the outcome. I miss that director so much. He had so much faith in me and I was a tiny little sophomore. He gave me the lead even though I didn't even read for that part. I didn't think I fit the lead, but I ended up falling in love with that character, the whole show, and the cast. In this play, I was a woman playing a man and at first I didn't think I could play a man, but it was so much fun to play a person who was trying to portray someone else and have that layer. Growing up with brothers, I always had a slight masculine personality trait. To be able to take that personality trait and amplify it by tenfold and have that be the character was really fun. I'm so thankful that it went the way it did. I think this experience reflected my identity because I grew from it. At first I was scared to do that play, but that decision impacted the rest of my high school career and as an actress. And I think it reflected my identity because... I don't know.

Mariah had a more challenging time reflecting on a story that reflected her perception of her own identity. Ultimately, she shared an important experience regarding how she grew from a theatrical performance. Mariah's story serves as a prime example of the challenge that participants struggled to articulate their conceptualization of their identity. Before she began sharing her story, she stated, “I'm trying. There's something here.” After sharing so much detail

about this meaningful experience in theatre, her conclusion of how all of it connected to her identity ended with an anticlimactic “*I don’t know.*” However, she draws upon her Affinity Identity of being an actress in her story and refers to herself as a “*tiny little sophomore*” that taps into her Institutional Identity at the time, as a relatively inexperienced high school student.

When she auditioned for the *Servant of Two Masters* play, she noted feeling that she didn’t fit any of the characters. Mariah was pulled towards what she found comfortable and admits later in her story that she was scared to take on a part that she initially did not connect with. However, as she concludes her story, she believes that she grew from the experience of doing something different. In this performance, Mariah had to take on and explore multiple, though fictional, identities. What stands out about Mariah’s story is that even though she felt that a part in that play was not what she personally wanted, she was willing to go forward with it even though she had her doubts. This absolutely reflects the “Hufflepuff” identity that she described. J. K. Rowling (1998) describes the traits of a Hufflepuff as having kindness, dedication, loyalty, fairness, patience, and a willingness to take on hard work. Her sense of dedication to the part even though she believed she would be happier in another play shines through in her story. Additionally, this concept of fairness also emerges in that she initially had a difficult time accepting that sometimes life is unfair when she was given the part without going through the call back process.

The concept of “loyalty and doing the right thing” is an important facet of how Mariah conceptualized herself as a Discourse Identity. The realization that theatre (and life) is not always fair resulted in challenge to her identity resulted in Mariah accepting that she needed to take advantage of the opportunity. Even though she realized that getting the lead role was perhaps unfair on some level, which one would assume might conflict with her sense of identity, she grew from the moment. While “doing the right thing” is still an essential part of her sense of identity, she connects this story to her identity because believed growth had occurred.

*Mikey's Identity Story – "I Keep Going Back to Happy"*

*I am Mikey... and I've never really thought about who I am. I like to consider myself a happy person, and I like helping people out. If I see someone who's really struggling, I'll go out of my way to help that person because I feel bad if I see someone struggling along. Like the other day I saw someone in a wheelchair pushing a box up the ramp. I thought, "I can't let them do that. I've got to move that box for them." But they didn't let me move the box, and that bugged me. I guess I like to be a happy helpful person. If I'm mad, my friends know don't mess with me because something is important if it makes me mad. I guess that's my identity? I feel like that's it. I don't really think about myself, but I keep going back to happy. I'd like to say adventurous as well. When I play Pokémon, I see this universe where you go on an adventure when you turn 10. That's just what you do. I wish that was the way our world worked. I would love to go on an adventure. I mean, I'm going to be a video game developer. I have so many ideas in my head, and I could create the adventure. I can't go on the adventures, but I can create them. I like to consider myself adventurous, but I'm also self-conscious. If I say something, I will think about it, and if nobody replies to me I will instantly say "Oh, man. I made a mistake in what I said." Even if it wasn't anything to do with what I said, I'll be like "Oh, no. I made the situation worse." Even if I helped the situation, I worry until they say, "Thanks, man. You helped me out." I will consider that I made the wrong decision until then. It goes back to me wanting to be helpful, and I will go out of my way to do what's best for my friends. Hurting the people around me is one of my biggest fears.*

As Mikey reflected upon his identity, he also struggled to put words to his thoughts. I had to ask several follow-up questions to encourage him to add additional details to his reflection, but a sense of his identity emerges after restorying his responses. Mikey's difficulty in pinpointing his identity can be seen throughout this response, especially when he claims that he has never fully considered what defines him. Of particular note in his story was the concept of helping people. Mikey is particularly focused on this aspect of his identity and it manifests itself when we



consider his Marshall Smith avatar that represents the well-known hero persona. His story of wanting to help the person in a wheelchair with the box and being told “no thanks” shows how his inability to do what he believed to be the “right” thing bothered him when he was told that his offer of help was not needed. In his mind, creating and playing through these virtual adventures provide him with the ability to do the things he would not be able to accomplish in his own life. This emphasizes the social connection he makes in regard to his identity. He frames himself in the context of being able to do things for other people, and all of these descriptions of himself fall within the category of Discourse Identities.

When he attempts to describe himself as adventurous, he prefaces this with the phrase “I’d like to say.” Just like Mikey noted that he would like to say he would have read the short stories found in *Gone Home* if he was playing the game unobserved, he fully acknowledged that he would still be unlikely to read. Here the concept of adventurousness represents an aspect of who he wishes he could be. This is evidenced by the fact that the examples of going on adventures he provides are all from video game experiences as opposed to the things he has done in his own life. The idea he appears to be trying to express is that he wishes for more adventure in his life than currently exists and perhaps video games provide him with that opportunity.

His final descriptor of his identity is his perception of his self-consciousness. The need for affirmation appears to be important to him as he needs the confirmation that he has actually helped someone so that he does not worry about the situation. Just as he felt bad about not being able to help someone that he perceived as needing help, Mikey feels better when people actually acknowledge that he in fact did help them. Though it did not feature in his attempts to directly describe his identity, Mikey twice referred to himself as a “gamer” while no other participant made that distinction. Even his desire for being an adventurous person connects directly to his Affinity Identity of being a gamer.

### *Colin's Identity Story – "Live Life By Its Rules"*

*I am Colin... and I try to live life by its rules. That's one of my biggest identifiers. I try to be a by the book kind of guy. I don't always achieve that goal, but I like to break free from environments with rules or a guided setup whenever I can. I do enjoy getting out of the rules and the you must do this, must dot your i's, cross your t's, yada, yada. With my love for anything nerdy like DC and Marvel Comics, I dive deep into anything that is unrealistic just to experience what it would be like to be on any plane of existence other than Earth. I enjoy seeing what that would be like. I enjoy reading, and I think it's one of the ways that I can break free from just following the rules day, by day, by day. It allows me to not always have to follow rules, rules, rules. I can be me. I can break free from whatever somebody wants me to be. I used to attend an arts academy every year in the summer for 10 years. Two summers ago, I was presented with an opportunity to break the rules and go out onto the campus at night. We would leave the dorms, get away from the counselors, and get away from everything. It was one of my last summers there, and my friends told me that we should go and do this. We're here. Why not? And I turned it down. It was with some of my closest friends from that academy, and I was presented with an opportunity to be with the people I would normally love to hang out with that night. I would hang out with them all day, every day at that academy if presented the opportunity to, but I turned it down. Several times. Looking back, seeing how there were no repercussions, no one ever found out, I slightly regret it. But at the same time I think it would have been just too outside of my character. Too outside of who I am to break that many rules. There's just a tiny little bit of me that wishes I would have, but for the most part, not really.*

Colin's identity story focuses on a social aspect of himself that strives to always do the right things and to follow the rules that have been set. Being someone who follows rules and does as he is told is a central part of who Colin believes he is. Interestingly, he shows a desire to "break free" from the rules of life by engaging in video game worlds where a new set of rules may exist. By its very definition, according to McGonigal (2011), a game must have rules. The

distinguishing factor here is that games may allow us to follow rules that are different and unique from those set in society. And when games let you break the rules of the in-game society, there are typically consequences that will follow, yet the stakes of those consequences are significantly lower given that if the outcomes are not desirable, the loading of a previous save file can essentially erase all that happened. As with all of the previous identity stories present so far, Colin's identity story is firmly situated in how others perceive him through reasonable discourse.

In those moments where he feels that he does not have to follow the typical rules of life, such as reading comics or playing games, Colin feels that he can be himself. "I can be me. I can break free from whatever somebody wants me to be." This statement strongly implies that he feels that he has been following the expectations of others in his life. When reflecting on how he might feel if he received a hurtful letter like the one that Terry received from his father, Colin stated, "I'm fairly certain they [his parents] have supported everything I've done up until this point. This is the path they wanted for me." Even though Colin identifies as a rule follower, it would seem that he does not necessarily always want to be. If he feels more like himself when he is not having to be the strict rule follower that he believes himself to be. Throughout his interview, when referencing his parents, Colin would frequently refer to them as "the parents." While he describes his parents as being supportive, this peculiar use of "the parents" instead of "my parents" feels a bit detached or more authoritative.

An interesting parallel exists between Colin and the character of Sam in *Gone Home*. Colin notes that he feels that he can be himself when he is playing in a virtual world where he does not have to follow the rules constantly. This is reminiscent of the way in which Sam utilized her Captain Allegra stories, as means of expressing what she believed was her true self. At the time, these stories were the only way she felt she could show who she really was.

However, when Colin reflects upon whether he felt any regret about not breaking the rule at his summer camp, he states that it would have been out of character for himself. His moral

belief that he should be a rule-follower as a feature of his character would certainly represent an aspect of his identity, but it is not necessarily the same as one's identity.

*Jeremy's Identity Story – "That Rock Bottom Moment"*

*I am Jeremy... and I've had that rock bottom moment when I had nobody, and I felt like I didn't even have myself anymore. Where it felt like my own conscience hated me. There's this constant negativity when I spoke about myself and a sense of wanting to quit. I hit rock bottom the day I started dating my girlfriend. I had written out a note. I was done and couldn't do it anymore. All my friends were gone and the one guy I trusted completely stabbed my back. I had been in a horrible relationship and my last words to my previous girlfriend were "you've treated me horrifically and the one thing that you showed me was that last little bit of love and happiness that I had, you showed me where it was and I shot it right in the face. It's gone. No more of it." The day after I wrote that note I knew I'd either do it when I got back from the band contest the next day or within two weeks. But on the ride to the band contest, Jamie [name changed] started talking to me, and she actually got me laughing. I think I hadn't laughed in like a year and a half. Nothing was funny to me. But she said something that actually struck it. She was talking to me about all these things I had interest in too, and we were just having fun on the way over. I thought maybe there was something there and that I hadn't killed it all off. Knowing that there was somebody who understood and genuinely cared about me and showed it got me through. The fact that somebody was willing to open my book and actually read it instead of look at the dark, scary cover of everything. I actually went down as the 2017 class asshole. Everyone knew that she wanted to go out with me, but they told her "Don't do it. He's an asshole. He's a prick. He's going to treat you terribly." She told people they were only looking at the cover of things and not seeing what's going on in the background. I was known as the asshole but my actual nickname in band was The Beast. And I guess that note was kind of my rose that was slowly losing petals. And the more I look back on it, it's a modern Beauty and the Beast story. It's really poetic, and I actually ended up buying her and I bracers with hers saying "His Beauty" with her birthstone in it and*

*mine says "Her Beast" with my birthstone. Looking back, I figured I might as well take this as a second chance and hope for the best. See what I can prove, that I still care about somebody and can still do something. And it worked. It actually worked better than I thought it would've. Because here I am two and a half years later.*

Jeremy has previously referenced to himself as “The Beast” when comparing some of his lived experiences with the game *A Wolf Among Us*. During our interview this Beast persona represented a core aspect of what he considers as his identity. He noted feeling that he had hit “rock bottom” in his life when discussing how Sam Greenbriar must have felt, and I inquired about what happened to him to make him feel that way. Jeremy’s identity as “The Beast” serves as a powerful metaphor as he draws inspiration from the classic Beauty and Beast fairy tale. Jeremy views his suicide note as a modern take on how the Beast’s rose slowly lost its petals as a countdown until the Beast would forever be cursed and unable to return to his original form. In Jeremy’s case, he viewed this as the countdown towards the end of his life. Jeremy recalled:

*They called me a monster, just had a different term, I guess, but I still hang onto that. I don't want to let that part of me go because without him, I couldn't {p} I couldn't have gotten by in some of the ways, I couldn't have survived in a lot of ways. And so it's one of the tattoos I plan on getting is an outline of the Beast on my ankle. And, I don't know. I now take it as a sign of strength. Like I'm a beast but that just means I can push through and survive. But I'm also a big teddy bear.*

In this story, Jeremy shares a pivotal moment in his life that completely changed his outlook on life and his own view of his identity. Later in our interview, Jeremy revealed that he was actually engaged to his girlfriend before meeting his current girlfriend. Jeremy also shared that he sought out counseling after these events, which helped him to deal with everything that was weighing upon him. Jeremy admitted that he had considered committing suicide after his relationship with this fiancée fell apart following a period of severe depression. After seeking help, he reports that he is in a much better place in his life, and has moved on from his past.

Jeremy noted before sharing his story, “*It was years ago. I'm past in now, and I'm doing a lot better. A LOT better.*”

This story reintroduces “The Beast” persona that Jeremy eventually embraced and made his own. Looking at Jeremy today, one would be hard pressed to view him as any kind of beast. He comes across as a clean-cut, funny though a bit sarcastic, yet still respectful college freshman. When you look at how Jeremy presents himself in his story, he links the concepts of being an “asshole” and “prick” as something that accurately reflects who he is. While he may have internalized these qualities, I personally never experienced a moment during any of our interactions that demonstrated this negative perspective. Jeremy’s earlier connection to the game *The Wolf Among Us* and his angry outburst loading equipment for band reaffirms this point. The fact that he also says “*I'm also a big teddy bear*” reflects that there is a duality to his personality and how he views himself.

The importance and acceptance and the need for understanding truly stand out from Jeremy’s story. The old idiom of “don’t judge a book by its cover” certainly applied within the context of his story. The act of someone demonstrating she understood him and showed compassion was enough to give Jeremy enough pause to reconsider the direction he was heading. The fact that Jeremy considered the impact this absence would have on his band group ties into the aspect of loyalty that he views as another important factor of his identity.

Examining Jeremy’s story from the perspective of Gee (2000), this concept of identity as the Beast is constructed from how others view him. Like all of the identity stories described previously, this represents a discursively created identity in how other reasonable people might view him. Even though there was a negative connotation associated with this Beast persona, Jeremy embraced it. He viewed it as core part of himself using the Disney take on the Beauty and the Beast story to also bring into such an extent that he will be getting a tattoo and using the tale as a poetic reminder of his past and what had brought him to this point in his life. However,

Jeremy's story of his identity was not complete as new details of how he conceptualizes himself emerged throughout the interview.

While most participants typically shared one or two stories in relation to their sense of identity, Jeremy relayed tales that provided a deeper look at the difficulties he faced before coming to college. The revelations were so profound that it was necessary to include them as a second identity story addressing another core aspect of his identity. Of all of the participants, Jeremy's identity story was the most complex and detailed. At various points during our interview, Jeremy would share aspects of his past that began to reveal how these past experiences directly influenced how he viewed himself presently. What follows is an additional identity story that provides significant insights into how Jeremy conceptualizes his identity and how a difficult part of his life informs who he is today.

#### *Jeremy's Identity Story Part 2 – "Loyalty"*

*I am Jeremy... and I am very loyal to a point. When I give respect, I expect it back. When I make a friendship with somebody, I hold them to a high expectation of trust and loyalty. I used to have a lot of friends, but after that whole ordeal of getting backstabbed, it's more like I have acquaintances. As far as friends, it's very hard for me to let people get that close, and I'm trying to get rid of those trust issues. I'm letting you in, so it's a high expectation. The person who backstabbed me is the friend who came out to me. We had just recently started being friends again because I helped him with his depression. There's this whole psychology deal, when you hang around somebody, you take on parts of their personality. It's just natural. I started seeing the world like he did. I started seeing all the bad and a lot of negative things started happening to me, and I held onto them more than I would the good things. When my depression finally kicked in, all my friends were telling him, "Look. You're clean of your depression now and know how to get out of it and how to handle it. You need to help him because he was there for you three years." And he said, "No. I don't want it again. That's his problem. I went a couple years without someone every helping me. So he'll be fine on his own." One of my other friends kept telling him*

*that he couldn't do this to me. At this point a lot of my friends had left because they didn't want to deal with it. One of my buddies that took off told me, "You're a bummer to be around." I finally approached my friend who I had helped when he was depressed, and he basically told me, "Dude if you can't handle it, go ahead and let us get our mourning process over with." I couldn't believe it. I looked at my other friend, and he goes, "Are you telling him to kill himself?" And he replied, "If he can't handle it." I just remember thinking, "I'm on my own. Fuck it all." I just stood up and walked out. I went a year and a half with nobody in my life. He went two years with nobody in his life. I'm all past it now, but he's very aware that even though we are kind of friends now, there's always going to be a barrier he'll never be able to get over.*

This expectation of loyalty stands out for Jeremy as result of feeling that he had been betrayed by a friend that he demonstrated loyalty toward. As will be seen in the next chapter that examines emergent themes, Jeremy's friend had come out to him as bisexual. Jeremy was supportive of this friend stating, *"No, dude. Still my friend. I've had a lot of memories with you and you know a lot of experiences, and I'm not going to just straight drop you because of something like that."* Additionally, Jeremy noted in his story that he helped his friend to overcome his depression. However, when their roles were swapped and Jeremy started dealing with his own depression, his friend withdrew and even insinuated that Jeremy should end his life he could not handle how he felt.

Jeremy's description of taking on the personality of those we spend time with actually sounds more like the phenomenon of emotional contagion in which the emotions and mood of others can be "caught" by others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Personality is a relatively stable pattern of behaviors, cognitions, and feelings unique to a particular individual. However, as Jeremy spent more time with his friend who suffered from depression, he began to adopt negative cognitions and emotions that could have spurred his own depressive symptomology. Unfortunately, his friend that had dealt with his depression previously did not want to re-expose



himself to depressive behaviors and cognitions that Jeremy developed due to the fear that he would “catch” it again.

His use of the phrase “*I’m on my own*” emphasizes how Jeremy situates himself in the social context. Without his sense of loyalty being reciprocated by someone that he demonstrated loyalty towards when he felt that he needed it most, Jeremy nearly lost his own sense of self and brought him to the brink of suicide. The fact that Jeremy was willing to maintain his friendship with the person who “backstabbed” him exemplifies this notion of loyalty that he believes is a key part of who he is. This trait of loyalty is an aspect of Jeremy’s identity as it emerges through the discourse with others and how Jeremy is perceived by others through his actions.

### **Playing with a Virtual or Real Identity?**

By examining the identity stories of each of the participants, it became clear that these students understand their own identity primarily in regard to individual traits that other rational people would recognize in them through dialogue and discourse. One of the goals of this study was to develop a better understanding of any potential interplay that might exist between the player’s concept of self-identity (real) and the identity of the characters we play as (virtual) in the context of the interactive narrative that exists within some forms of video games. While Gee’s (2000) theory of identity was utilized to examine participants’ perspectives of their own identity, Gee (2007, 2011) has also examined the concept of identity as it occurs through the playing of video games. Gee proposes that three types of identities are utilized when playing certain types of video games. These identities are the player’s real, virtual, and projective identities. Do players approach these narrative games as if they were playing as themselves or do they roleplay the experience and approach the games as if they actually were that character? The answer, as with so many things, is more complicated than one might hope to find.

A number of factors may influence how players approach whether they will embrace their real or virtual identity while playing a narrative-focused video game. What can be discerned from the data collected is that players may play through a game multiple times taking a different

approach on each playthrough. This is not to say that players will rely solely upon a real or virtual identity while playing. In actuality, a complex dynamic exists in which both real and virtual identities are engaged simultaneously as a hybrid of identities. Certain games that include player choice and significant amounts of player interaction that influence the progression of the story may be more likely to result in different play approaches. Games such as *Gone Home* that have a linear story and with little player choice beyond what objects to examine and what area to explore next, may not incentivize different plays. However, the benefit of using a game like *Gone Home* is that it provides an opportunity to examine how players approach the game knowing that they will likely only play the game a single time. Do players play as themselves, as the character in the game, or some combination of the two?

*Gone Home* does not explicitly tell the player how Kaitlin describes her own personality or identity; however, there are subtle hints scattered in the environment. For example, the player can find plaques for both Sam (Samantha) and Katie (Kaitlin) that use each letter of their name to describe their personality (see Figure 4.9). These plaques give players a broad sense of the



**Figure 4.9** – Personality plaques for Samantha and Kaitlin

personality of these two characters along with the voiceover work and the character writings. The journals, notes, and short stories that Sam wrote were mentioned frequently by participants, but the writings done by Kaitlin were not discussed by participants at all when we sat down to discuss the game. Even though Kaitlin was off adventuring in Europe, she wrote her family postcards that

can be found scattered around the house. These short notes to her family provide the player with additional insights into her personality.

I asked Lauren whether she believed she played through *Gone Home* as herself or as Kaitlin Greenbriar. Throughout her gameplay and interview, Lauren would frequently impose aspects of herself upon the character of Kaitlin. She admitted that she didn't know a whole lot about Kaitlin Greenbriar beyond being a college student (an Institutional Identity) who spent the last year studying abroad in Europe and that she is the older sibling in a family of four (a Natural Identity). While playing the game, the player can uncover details that shed some light on Kaitlin's relationships with her family and how she differs from her sister, Sam. The game requires the player to make inferences about who Kaitlin is through the discoveries made in that house. When a player moves the cursor over objects in the game, text will appear over the object that provides some sort of description of what the player has found. However, occasionally the mouse over text reveals Kaitlin's interpretation and knowledge regarding the object. These moments can serve as a reminder to players that they are viewing the world through the eyes of a different person, Kaitlin Greenbriar.

When I asked participants whether they tend to play narrative-focused video games as if they were playing as themselves or playing as the character, all of them acknowledge that they tend to play as if they were truly the ones making the decisions in the game. One of the female focus group members noted:

*I really like to identify with the character that I'm playing, if I get to create my own character. Especially in a lot of video games don't necessarily have a lot of female characters that you play, and so I prefer female.*

From this point of view, playing someone similar to ourselves may help us to feel like we can identify with that virtual persona. However, when a character being played as in the games is an established character with a distinct personality, one focus group participant stated that he would make choices based upon what he perceived that character would do in that situation.

In the case of *Gone Home*, all participants believed that they ultimately played the game as a combination of themselves and Kaitlin Greenbriar. Even though participants realized that both their real and virtual identities were in play while playing through the game, Colin and Lauren believed they played the game more as if they were actually Kaitlin Greenbriar. The other participants (Mariah, Jeremy, and Mikey) instead believed that they approached the game more as if it was really themselves in the situation. In particular, participants noted that it was difficult to fully play as themselves because they had not personally experienced the things that Kaitlin experienced in the game. As will be covered, what participants believe and what they actually do while playing the game does not necessarily align.

Lauren noted that she felt that she really was not herself while she played the game. When asked to elaborate on this more, she explained that her life experiences are different from Kaitlin's which made it difficult to imagine herself in the scenario presented in the game. However, when she found aspects of herself in the character she embodied, she felt like more of herself when playing the game. In particular, Lauren again discussed the narrative-focused video game called *Life is Strange* that has players taking on the role of Max Caulfield. When playing as a different character in a video game, a clear division between the real and virtual self may not actually exist.

**Lauren:** *I think it's somewhere in-between. 'Cause I put a little bit of myself in there, but like they get options that I wouldn't do sometimes. Like in Life is Strange there's like two options and you get to choose the less of, lesser of the evils. And you're like, "Okay, I wouldn't do either of these but I guess I'll do this one," 'cause it seems like something Max would do {?}. That seems right. And (sigh) like I kinda felt like Max but I didn't too much just 'cause she did have this backstory and she had this power I didn't have. And {p} she like dealt with things differently than I think I would've.*

**Lauren:** *I think I kinda felt like I was taking on the role of Kaitlin just because {p} she was surrounded by so many things that I'm not really familiar with, like I didn't have a sister when I*

*was growing up. So, like. That was like new and I can't really like experience that first-hand or like think of Samantha as my sister, {p} easily. And then, see I was like kind of Kaitlin and I wasn't really me during that game. And my parents don't really have like the most marriage problems. And they're not lying about (laugh) anniversaries when they're really going on a retreat, so. I felt like I was a different character that entire time.*

What is profound about Lauren's statement is that because the experiences presented in *Gone Home* were unfamiliar to her, she ended up feeling like she played the game as if she was taking on the role of Kaitlin. This is quite intriguing that she felt like she was more like a character because she did not have those experiences personally. Lauren also noted that typically when she plays a narrative-focused video game, she tends to approach the gameplay as if she was playing as herself. One way to potentially explain why Lauren approached *Gone Home* and other games comes down to the level of interaction and decisions that the player must make during gameplay. *Gone Home* does have player interaction, but the game does not provide a lot in the way of player choice. For example, Lauren noted, "*With Kaitlyn, I (sigh) {p} I don't know if I learned the most from her character 'cause she {p} didn't really make the like the decisions. She just like found out what happened to her sister.*" However, Colin had a different take entirely from Lauren and commented, "*Mostly I felt like Kaitlyn. I was playing as Kaitlyn. Um, because like I said my home life was, was just like much more scaled down version of this...*"

Colin felt like he embodied the character because of similar connections to his own family not in spite of them like Lauren. This discrepancy of perspectives actually suggests that real identities and virtual identities may be dynamically intertwined in ways that make it difficult to easily isolate which particular identity is being utilized. Given the complex medium of video games, players must rely on a multitude of identities during the experience. What emerged from the observations and interviews in this study is that the third type of identity that Gee writes about, the projective identity, appears to be a central part of the video game experience.

Mikey explained that he typically tries to play video games as if he was playing as himself. Similarly, Mariah believed that she largely played the game as if she were herself. “*There were moments where I was like ‘I’m another person,’ but then you sort of absorb the story as yourself. And then you sort of have these moments when you remember, ‘Oh, yeah. I’m not myself in this. I’m somebody else.’*” Mariah noted that because the game addresses the player as Katie, she felt that she was brought out of herself in those moments. This hints at the concept that players are not fully playing as themselves or as the character they embody. In actuality, players are experiencing both perspectives as they situate themselves into the character. According to Gee (2007, 2011), video games can create an interplay of real, virtual, and projective identities that may be drawn upon simultaneously while playing the game. Evidence suggests that players are taking a projective identity while playing the game.

### **Projective Identities: Projecting Ourselves into Our Characters**

Participants in this study were generally split on their approach to playing *Gone Home*. However, the game has its ways of reminding players that they are not really playing as themselves. In many ways, participants took on a hybrid identity in which they projected aspects of themselves into the existing character they embody within the game. As Gee (2007) explains, players will project their own values and desires into the characters they play. For example, Mariah stated:

*I mean, coming home to an empty house would've been unsettling, first of all. And then finding out all of what happened while she was gone would have been {p} really hard to find out. 'Cause it's not like, um, it was this century where we have cell phones and everything. She had no idea. She only had postcards to communicate with them and you can only write so much on a postcard. And so they weren't really communicating with her what was happening. And "I" would have felt disconnected from my family, which I would never want to feel. Especially knowing that my sister {p} left, like gone, and I'll probably won't ever see her again. That would be {p} devastating.*

Mariah reflected upon what it would have felt like if she had truly experienced the events of *Gone Home*, and in the process, she projects herself into the character of Kaitlin. This act of perspective taking and understanding helped her to balance the dual roles of playing as herself and as Kaitlin Greenbriar. While Mariah also does not personally have any sisters, she was able to situate herself into the experience of having a sister like Sam and how difficult it would be for her to deal with her sister running away.

For Mariah, music is a big part of her life. She surrounds herself with music on a daily basis. This became evident in how she played *Gone Home* and interacted with various mixed tapes she found in the game. While most players would put the mixed tapes that Lonnie made for Sam into the cassette players, they would stop the music after just a few seconds. Mariah on the other hand let every tape play fully. *“Well, um, I like music, and I wanted to see like what Lonnie had given her and like the whole mixed tape thing was really cute. I think music is a very important part of the story, to be honest.”* She explained that she saw Sam grow as a person through her musical tastes. *“Cause when she meets Lonnie, she shows her this whole new genre that she hasn’t really explored yet, and it really helps her, I think it helps her a lot. It gives her sort of a foundation to build off of for her own identity and it really impacted her, I think.”*

In Mariah’s playthrough, she also made efforts to make sure that items she picked up were put back in their place. She explained:

*I guess I was just trying to keep the house tidy. I didn’t know where the plot was going (laugh). I don’t want mom to come home and realize that she had made a wreck of the house and she’d have to listen to a lecture. No one wants to go through that.*

I asked Mariah if she considered herself an orderly person.

*No. That’s not really... um, if it’s my own stuff I don’t really care. But if it’s somebody else, oh, I don’t wanna {p} infringe upon whatever process you have. So. I feel like I’m more orderly in front of people. If that makes sense. Whenever I’m on my own, I’m eck, who cares? If it’s all my stuff. When it’s somebody else’s stuff... yeah.*

Mariah projected this aspect of herself into how she approached playing the game.

Mariah does not play console games, preferring to play games on the computer. Even though it took her some time to build up confidence using the game controller, she took the extra steps to try to always put things back to keep the house nice and tidy. Other players would simply throw items down on the ground with little regard for these digital artifacts within the game, but Mariah treated them as if they were real. However, Mariah was not alone in how she would project herself into the character of Kaitlin.

**Lauren:** *Usually, I think I just like it whenever I can get, uh, relate to characters or something. And sometimes I can't but sometimes I just really do. And I think in like the Imagine DS game, I think I related to her somehow even though we weren't really similar. I think it was just like the social status or whatever that I kinda related to {?} and then I don't know. I kinda related to Max [from Life is Strange] just in the case that she really wanted to help a lot of people, and I really wanted to help Kate. So, and then {p} I kinda related to Kaitlin, just because of the writing thing, I think. And she was just coming... I think once you see through a person's eyes, you kinda feel you are that person. And I don't know. They're just kinda going through the flow, and I feel I am, so I just relate to a lot of main characters in a lot of games.*

Lauren brings aspects of herself into the characters she plays with that same desire to help others and demonstrate the value of acceptance and understanding that she wished others had demonstrated during the difficult friend transitions she experienced in middle school. The character of Kate in *Life is Strange* is a kind person with strong religious convictions, and those that do not understand her perspective ridicule her and spread nasty rumors just for the sake of being cruel. If Kate ends up jumping off of the building in the game, it has a significant impact on the story, but players can continue on with that as a part of the story that was weaved together by their actions. For Lauren though, she felt so emotionally connected that she would not progress in the game until she could do what she believed was the right thing and saved Kate from harm. And



while it has been previously discussed how Lauren inserted her interest in writing into the character of Kaitlin Greenbriar, it again re-emerges here.

A key example of how players may project themselves into game characters emerged frequently when players discussed the popular video game series, *The Sims*. *The Sims* is a people simulator that allows players to create their own characters (called Sims), create their unique spectrum of traits and personality, and then live out their lives. Players are responsible for their basic needs and work towards achieving each Sim's personal life goals all while trying to balance their social life and work life. Lauren and Mariah share some of their thoughts regarding their connect when playing *The Sims*.

**Lauren:** *[When playing The Sims] I'm kinda creating the characters with like me in mind, but then I'll like have my character have kids or something and then I'll like have the kids have a narrative, like it's like their lifelong dream to become a painter or something. And they're just going through life. I haven't personally created my own narrative yet, I don't think. But I have goals for them.*

**Mariah:** *[When playing The Sims] Um, usually if it's, I'll create like a character that's myself in a video game. I'll create a character that's myself. And then if I go back, I'll usually do something {p} different. But usually my first instinct is to make something that represents me and myself and not like, "oh, this would be a cool character to have" and sort of make someone else. I try to make myself. Uh, I, I, {p} it's weird. 'Cause as an actor you would I would want to think like how somebody else would think in a video game. But when I'm playing a video game I usually like to think how I'm thinking. And I sort of, selfishly, play as myself, I guess, instead of trying to create someone new and then play through that perspective.*

*I'm definitely like um, sort the light side of things. You know, like if I was in Star Wars I'd be a Jedi, and so I definitely try to do what's right and what's good, and not be like "ooh, I'm going to be an evil character and try to mess things up" like no. Let's do the right thing. (laugh) I'm, I'm a*

very, I'm very much a Hufflepuff in that like let's to the thing that's good when I play video games (laugh).

This sense of “do the right thing” occurred in many of the stories that participants shared that echo the mentality that Mariah expressed. Lauren and Mikey exhibit their desire to save people from harm in the games they play, which connects with things they value in their own lives. Colin’s sense of duty to follow the rules comes through:

*I definitely approach every situation with okay, how would I react to this? I mean, obviously there's no way I would ever need to react to a dragon in real life, but um, a lot of the different like how would I approach the Thieves' Guild? Which in this playthrough, I, I avoided the Thieves' Guild. I turned down their invitation and I don't know, I haven't found if there's a path where I can just destroy the Thieves' Guild. But uh, I, as me, I would definitely do everything to be against the Thieves' Guild, and that's how my character is. I stick to the law. I try not to anger the guards whenever possible. I don't steal from any of the vendors. I don't do any of that. I, I uh, I quest and I make my money legitimately. Uh, definitely my last character in Skyrim is me and not some elf.*

Additionally, as we saw with how Jeremy approached the game *The Wolf Among Us*, he viewed Bigby Wolf as an extension of himself as he made choices that he believed would be the choices he would have made if he were truly in that situation. All of these scenarios serve as excellent examples of how players may project themselves into the characters they play. When I asked if he tends to approach video games as if he was playing as himself or as the character, Jeremy explained, “*I tend to play as myself. I want to put myself in that perspective and that environment and try to see what would happen if I was the one to make the choices.*”

Even though many participants felt that they attempt to play many games as if they are playing as themselves, the type of game being played appears to have an impact. For example, some games may encourage multiple playthroughs that require the player to approach the game in

entirely different ways. In these cases, the type of identity they adopt can vary between these playthroughs.

### *First Play Identity vs Second Play Identity*

Like many forms of media, video games can be enjoyed more than once; however, some video games may provide players with opportunities to dramatically change their gameplay style as well as the direction the narrative takes. Therefore, many participants noted that the way they approached their first time playing a game may be very different from their subsequent playthroughs. For example, Lauren explained how in her first play she approaches the game based upon her own personality and values:

*If it's like the first time I'm playing anything, I think I just do it the way I would do it, and the second time I'll probably do it like worst possible scenario or something (laugh). Unless I like really screw up the first time I did it, but (sigh) I think the second time I just {p} I don't know if I would choose the most like how would Max choose it unless it's just two options that I just really don't agree with. But the first time I think I would just choose how I would do it, and then from then on just do whatever I could to find a different scenario, a different ending. And like just experience all of the different interactions with all the other characters.*

The desire to see “*what could have been*” or the “*worst possible scenario*” within a game speaks to a sense of curiosity and the act of discovery that comes with finding new approaches and story elements within the game. Lauren’s idea of doing the “*worst possible scenario*” also suggests that her personal playthrough would be something other than the worst possible scenario; that she would be making choices and decision that were more in-line with a perceived correct path.

As we saw in Jeremy’s reflection upon how he connected so well to the character of Bigby Wolf from *The Wolf Among Us*, he admitted that he played the game at least three times trying different choices to see how it would influence the story and how other characters would treat Bigby across the game’s five chapters. In Jeremy’s case, he felt that he and Bigby aligned on

a personality level, and he believed he made choices that were in-line with what he would personally do and what Bigby the character would do. (He has read the comics, which provides additional insights into Bigby's personality, though it is unclear if he read them before or after playing *The Wolf Among Us*). Jeremy also claimed that he made decisions within the game that matched the canonical choices set by the game designers. While I could not verify his claim, his perception that he personally made the correct choices that matched the designer's intended vision provides insight into his perspective.

Just like Lauren and Jeremy, Mikey also explained that many times, he would play a game multiple times to try out different decisions and pathways within the game.

**Mikey:** *Most of the, like The Walking Dead, I always do two let's plays. Or maybe three. Depending on how versatile the game is. I usually do the first playthrough, I choose and make choices based on me. In a game where it's choice driven, like the choices, I always make the decision the first time I play a choice driven game based upon myself. The second time, I try to save as many people as possible. Like, I, I make choices and I make mistakes making those choices. Like, it's like oh no I made the wrong decision here. Like this is what I would have done and this person's dead now and oh no. It kinda comes back on you and it hurts you. Because I thought that was the best choice in that situation. And then I go back through, and I don't ever look through guides until like I can't figure out how to save a character...*

**Shawn:** *So like games um where you get a choice if you're going to align with like good vs evil, do you ever do like an evil playthrough? [Note: Many video games have a karma system in which choices align with a good path and an evil path, such as in the Mass Effect and Infamous series]*

**Mikey:** *That's what I said, with the third, the third let's play, I typically do an evil one... I want to see the evil side. Because the developers put that side in there for a reason.*

Once again, this idea of wanting to see what can happen or how a game can go in an entirely new direction stands out from Mikey's reflection. In many ways, the first playthrough

serves as the player's personal preferences for how the story progresses, while future playthroughs serves as "what if" scenarios.

In fact, all participants reported playing a game multiple times trying different approaches to the gameplay. In all of these cases, the first play is consistently their playthrough making choices as if they were playing as themselves. These participants are projecting their own values and experiences into the games they play. Future playthroughs provide players with opportunities to explore alternative approaches that may deviate from perceived reflection of themselves. This is not to say that players will always play games the first time in ways that align with their own values. Jeremy and Mikey both noted that while playing open-world games like *Skyrim* that gives players a huge level of freedom regarding the actions they take in the game world they might use the game as a means of catharsis. For example, Jeremy described walking into a village and killing everyone after having a bad day. While this act is disturbing, there are consequences for his actions. Non-player characters will treat him more aggressively in other locations as news travels of his deeds, shopkeepers may be less likely to do business with him, and a bounty may be placed on his head.

While there appears to be preliminary evidence to suggest that players may be projecting themselves into the characters they play, Gee (2007) also views the projective identity in another way. Players may view the characters they play as within the game as their own projects in which they are creating and refining as they play. This conception of playing a video game character as a project ties closely with the concept of co-authoring the story within a game.

### *Projection as a Means of Co-Authoring the Story*

Dubbleman (2011) suggests that the player may take on the role of the author who guides the narrative through the direct control of the central character's actions. However, an alternative role is that the player becomes "an embodied participant in the world of the story," (p. 158). While the player embodies Kaitlin throughout the game, the player does not control how she feels and how she reacts. For instance, while exploring a seemingly impossibly huge basement, which

Sam had secretly set up as a hideout of sorts, I came across a personal note that had slipped back behind an end table. I had picked up dozens of notes, scraps of paper, and postcards strewn about the house, but this one was different. As I began reading this note, I realized that this one was much more personal. Much more private. The sort of stuff you don't want anyone in your family to read. The note features Sam recollecting on a very intimate experience with Lonnie. At least that's the gist of what I got from reading the first couple of lines. But I didn't finish the letter. Kaitlin wouldn't let me. She was uncomfortable and let me know. The game puts the letter down, and no matter how many times I try to read it again, the game/Kaitlin will not oblige. Each time I try, the mouse over text that reflects Kaitlin's thoughts reinforces that she will not look at it. It is a fascinating dynamic that exists between Kaitlin and myself. Obviously Kaitlin has memories from her past based upon some of the comments she makes as she uncovers pieces of her childhood. For example, of course Kaitlin knew that her father wrote science fiction about thwarting the assassination of JFK through time travel. But the player does not have any prior knowledge about this until the player uncovers that particular information. Cassidy (2011) argues that the player never truly becomes the character he or she "controls" in a video game, and therefore the only protagonist of any video game narrative is actually the player. However, in this particular case, the game cues the player into the thoughts that Kaitlin has as she uncovers new details.

In Colin's case, he felt that like he was truly Kaitlin Greenbriar while playing the game. However, he acknowledged that he was "*playing as Kaitlin.*" He made direct connections to Kaitlin's family dynamic to his own family. He also notes that while he felt like Kaitlin, his brother was a representation of Sam. As he compares the Greenbriar family to his own, he notes, "*I mean, {p} our family is still a functional family and this is very clearly a family where they drove, or the daughter was felt like she was driven to get away and run away.*"

Notice here the sudden shift from the family driving Sam away to Sam feeling that she was driven away. Colin continued:

*I mean, my brother still wanted to get out, but he didn't run away without telling anyone or you know, leave notes um. So, I definitely felt more like Kaitlyn than myself. {p} And while I was playing it, um, there was the few little aspects, you know, like seeing the homework that Kaitlyn did, you know, that had, was like full marks from the teacher, you know, perfectly written out homework. Where as, um, Samantha's work on the same subject was very, very against what the teacher wanted.*

This refers to a reproductive system worksheet that both Sam and Kaitlin completed when they were in high school. Katie followed directions while Sam took a more creative approach that did not follow the guidelines of the assignment.

This is not to say that all players will have this same kind of connection. For example, Jeremy did not have as strong of a connection to the characters of *Gone Home* as the other participants.

*Um, {p} I think there were small, {p} there were small little pockets and moments where I {p} kinda sunk into the character a little. And so for the most part it was kind of me playing Kaitlin. Mostly I wasn't able to sink into the character so much.*

However, later while explaining his reaction to an acceptance letter for a summer writing program that Sam received, Jeremy felt like he could feel himself inserting himself into the character of Kaitlin.

*Um, I kinda did sink into it, and become Kaitlin at that point. Because I was like, oh wow, congratulations. You know, I wanted to congratulate the sister and like you know, I guess give her a hug to be able to make it into a program like that and to have financial aid cover 75% of your tuition. Like that's a huge deal. And so I was really impressed with that and really proud of that.*

Jeremy shared that he had been dealing with some financial issues associated with paying for college. “Yeah. She's lucky. She's got most of that covered, and I'm sitting over here with like

*student debt and having to go into the military to get my stuff covered for. So I was like, if I had that. Mmmm. (laugh)”*

As he played through *Gone Home*, he projected his own struggles to pay for his own schooling which had an impact upon how he interpreted and framed this aspect of Sam’s life. Jeremy did note that he “sunk into the character” during some moments, so I inquired further. Jeremy noted:

*I think the moment where {p} it's one of the sister's journal where she talked about going to a concert and then staying the night at one of Lonnie's friend's place, and sharing a, um, sharing a room with Lonnie. Talking about that I kinda sunk into Kaitlin being like "oh, you know, don't {p} take that moment for granted." Like, I felt like I was her older sister talking to herself, don't take that moment for granted, you know. {P} I kinda went sibling mode I guess, with it.*

His description of entering sibling mode stands out in particular. Throughout his gameplay observation, he would make little quips as if he were talking to Sam, as if sharing his brotherly advice and encouragement.

In response to the “Dealing with Roots” journal where Sam lets an intimate moment slip by –

*"That's okay, kid. We all have that moment in our life."*

In response to the “Adjusting in the Dark” journal where Sam begins to explore her feelings for

Lonnie – *"Meh. Young love butterflies. God those are painful."*

In response to the “There Was Nothing Wrong” journal where Sam and Lonnie share their first kiss –

*"Well, good for you, champ. Nice. See things work out."*

When I asked Jeremy about this tendency, he laughed and said “I do it to, to my own siblings like my older brother like when he does something that I've already gone through.” This provides a strong example of the ways in which players may project themselves in to the experiences of the character they embody within the game.



The designers of *Gone Home* have commented they created the game with the developers themselves as a second player in the experience (Morganti, 2014). Just as the designers are a second player in the game, so too are the players serving the role of designer in the game, especially in regard to their construction of meaning from the game's narrative.

**Lauren:** *In my senior year, I didn't play much games at all. I was kinda playing Minecraft at the beginning. And like Minecrafter whenever I first started it, I, I felt like was coming up with my own narrative for the game {?} and I really liked discovering all the new things... I always build like a castle or something. So (sigh) {p} I don't know, it's a weird narrative. I think I was just, it wasn't a concrete narrative but I was like building a town and at first I thought because I watched playthroughs and like that before I got it. I thought there were other characters in the game when I bought it. (laugh) And it's not like that at all. So I was just like creating my own thought of townies. I created hotels and stuff, and like houses and shops. And that was fun to do and at the end of the day they just, they're not comin' because they don't exist. And I think that's what I got out of Minecraft for, mostly. I'll come back to it every now and then, but I just can't get invested like I was in the very beginning... And I think that's why I like The Sims, 'cause like there's so many people to interact with. They have weird stories because the developers wrote up stories. Yeah, I like hearing about other people's stories too I think.*

Even when a game does not explicitly have a story, or might not be front and center like in the case with *Minecraft*, players may impose their own stories as they play. The power for players to create their own stories not just through the pathways set within the context of the game could potentially be a powerful learning tool both formally and informally. *The Sims* allows the player to live the life of someone else with their own unique desires, motivations, and dreams. The player can mold these experiences through the narratives they construct for these characters. This provides players with opportunities to explore new roles and perspectives as they shape their personal narrative. *Minecraft* also gives the power of creation over to the player to an even greater extent. Everything that the player does in this game involves mining resources and

building things you need to survive. But this game also encourages players to explore the world to find rare resources such as diamonds to make some of the most powerful items in the game. *The Sims* and *Minecraft* provide players with the opportunity to tell their own stories. More narrative-focused games will commonly allow the player to potentially influence the direction that the pre-existing story takes. In the case of *Gone Home*, players not only take on the role of Kaitlin but also a more informal role of detective. Players must reconstruct the narrative they play and will need to fill in the gaps by making inferences and deductions as they find the various clues that will ultimately solve the mystery of where has the Greenbriar family gone. Jeremy reflects how the video game medium differs from other forms of media:

*It gives you a chance to {p} you know, you don't have to sit there and think about it yourself. It shows you all these things. You know, you actually get to see these people's reactions but you also in a way get to control, there's a set story. But you get to control it a little yourself. So it gives you that power of you're also the author of this. You know, you're also making this {p} with, with the writer. You. {p} It. {p} I, I, to me it's the interactive part of it {p} is {p} I'm trying to think of a good word to put with it. It's just the interactions are basically what makes, sets it apart.*

When Jeremy states that “you don’t have to sit there” he is alluding to the more passive nature of non-interactive mediums such as books or movies. Movies, books, television, and video games can all make us think and consider possibilities, but games turn over some form of control to the player. With this more active presence and the potential to influence the game’s progression, the player also shares part of the authorship role within the game. As will be seen when the concepts of media literacy are examined within the context of narrative-focused video games, the interactive element is an important aspect of the experiences for many players.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced specific participants in the study and reexamined the overall methodology. The stories and connections made by participants reflect the interconnection that

exists between situated learning and the player's identity, whether real, virtual, or projective, as a means of constructing meaning from the content of the game. Environments that support situated learning will encourage active engagement, reflective thinking, and evaluation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Having explored player accounts and stories in detail in relation to Gee's theory of identity and situated learning theory, the next chapter will explore the emergent themes found across the collected data.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS - EMERGENT THEMES

Chapter 4 examined the stories of identity and personal connections participants shared in response to playing *Gone Home* and other narrative-focused video games. The current chapter examines the emergent themes that were uncovered during the analysis process. As mentioned in Chapter 4, all focus groups, gameplay observations, and interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. An open coding process was used to identify and code for common themes in the data. Through the process of reading through transcripts multiple times and examining screenshot artifacts captured by participants while playing *Gone Home*, the explicit and implicit meanings were identified and analyzed. Excerpts from the focus groups, gameplay observations, and individual interviews were all utilized in the thematic analysis process using the data collection methods detailed in the previous chapter. Initially, 44 separate codes were identified, reexamined, and reanalyzed to develop categories and patterns that ultimately established six core themes across datasets (see Appendix C).

The first half of the identified themes address significant connections that participants made between their own lived experiences and their experiences in video games. The first theme “Coming Out and Seeking Acceptance” focuses on participants’ reflections of their experiences with friends coming out to them in connection to Sam’s experience doing the same with her family. This theme also examines how participants interpreted Sam’s self-discovery regarding her romantic identity based upon in-game narratives written by Sam. The second theme “The Value of Friendship” explores how participants connected the importance of friendship in their own

lives in relation to Sam and Lonnie's building friendship. Connected to this core theme was a subtheme regarding how participants view video games as ways of connecting with others socially. The third theme "Adjusting to Change" examines the ways in which participants connected their own experiences dealing with change personally in comparison to the life changes detailed in *Gone Home*.

The second half of identified themes address how participants experienced and approached the act of playing narrative-focused games and how they derived meaning from the experience. The fourth theme "Emotionally Connecting to a Virtual Person" explores the ways in which participants connected emotionally to a character in a video game. This theme is examined using two major examples that emerged in the data regarding the issue of suicide and the feeling of rejection. The fifth theme "Engagement in the Gaming Experience" details ways in which narrative-focused video games kept participants engaged and interested while playing the game. The use of discovery, player interaction, and relatable characters all emerged as aspects that connect with this theme. The sixth and final theme "Playing the Role" takes a look at the ways in which participants approached playing *Gone Home* and other video games as a type of performance as well as a means of temporary escape from reality.

Before exploring each of these core themes in more detail, it is important to first address a trend noticed during the gameplay observation portion of the study. *Gone Home* involves players examining and scrutinizing a variety of textual objects in the virtual environment. Reading through these in-game documents provide a significant amount of contextual content in order to fully understand the events taking place in the game. While not necessarily a theme in and of itself, a pattern emerged in which players were selectively deciding which items to read and which items to ignore.

### **A Notable Trend: "I'd like to say I would have read"**

*Gone Home*'s central gameplay mechanic is the use of environmental exploration in order for the player to uncover details about the story and what happened to the Greenbriar family.

While the player has the freedom to pick up nearly any object in the house that would typically be picked up in the real world, not every object will provide players with information or insight into the game's story or characters. While the game does utilize environmental storytelling elements to provide details to the story such as a pillow fort built in the living room or drawers being pulled out showing that someone had been looking for something in a hurry, the player will also find notes and letters that explicitly reveal more about relationships and important events. During the gameplay observations, a trend emerged during which players would selectively choose what they would read and what they would merely skim or skip altogether. For example, Mikey purposefully skipped over the short stories written by Sam that are found at various points during the game but would spend more time reading a letter from Carol, Janice's friend from college. Mikey explained:

*She [Sam] had a bunch of stories around, but I figured they weren't really [p] if I probably read them I could've compared some stuff that she wrote to her life. But I didn't read the stories. But I felt like they were long. I was like, I could read this and there was a lot that were similar, and I was like I could read this or I could continue finding out about the story. And that's probably my reason for not reading them.*

When I asked Mikey if he believed if he would have read if he had played the game on his own without someone observing him, he noted, "I'd like to say I would have read, but I also feel like I probably wouldn't have."

Mikey's reflection reveals that he believed that not all of the written documents in the game necessarily moved the story along. He made the assumption that Sam's fictional creative writing would not provide any information about the story. Mikey was not alone in this tendency. Mariah jokingly acknowledged that she did not read everything in the game. I mentioned to her that other participants simply skimmed through the written documents. "Yeah, that was me because I was just trying to (whisper) finish the game. I don't have time for this." In this way, Mariah viewed many of the notes and letters in the game as obstacles to completing the game.

Similarly, Colin admitted that he skimmed through most of the documents he encountered in the game. Lauren explained that while she enjoyed the bits of the stories she did read, she explained, “I mean like I didn't get a chance like to read it all.” This statement implies the perception that there was a time limit restriction during her observation. Most participants noted that they were uncertain if they would have taken the time to read everything even if they didn't have someone watching them play through the game.

This tendency to not spend the time needed to read all of the items in the game could be due to an observer effect (also known as the Hawthorne effect; Landsberger, 1959) in which knowing that they are being observed might impose some unspoken need to move quickly through the game in order to not waste time for the researcher. For example, Jeremy would initially pick up postcards he found that Kaitlin had written to her family early in the game. He began reading these postcards but as the game progressed he would spend less time reading these notes and eventually began to ignore them altogether. Occasionally participants would look at an item briefly and would put it down so quickly that would be unreasonable for even the fastest reader to have fully read the item's contents. Players would typically begin the game fully reading the items they discovered, but based upon their interpretation of whether the content was of value (helps to explain the story), this would impact whether they would read similar types of items in the future.

From an educational standpoint, this finding that participants may be quickly assessing whether a written document carries value reflects the concern that students may be struggling to find meaning and significance in what they are learning. As an instructor in the college classroom, I have personally seen the tendency for students to not engage in their assigned readings if they even do them at all. One previous research study found that only 44% of college students reported completing all assigned reading and only 55% of those who complete those readings demonstrated comprehension of that material (Hoeft, 2012). Hoeft reported that some of the core reasons students reported not reading was a perception of not having the time needed to

read or a lack of interest in the material. This potentially connects to the idea that students may be struggling to find meaning and significance in their education (Wesch, 2008). As will be covered while exploring the first core theme, not recognizing significant details in documents deemed unimportant can have a tremendous impact on how scenarios are interpreted and understood.

### **Coming Out and Seeking Acceptance**

The first theme that emerged for all participants was the connection between their experiences with friends who have come out to them as LGBTQ as well as the need for acceptance their friends encountered. The central story of *Gone Home* focuses on the coming of age story for Sam Greenbriar, especially in regard to her exploration and eventual embracement of her sexual identity during the mid-1990's. In one of the journal entries that Sam writes in the game, she shares her concern about how her parents would react to this realization. Sam's journal entry titled "The Nunnery" is presented below:

*Katie, you know how mom and dad are. Not exactly... super open-minded. About things. It feels like every minute I don't spend with Lonnie, I spend worrying about them finding out about us. And what would happen if they did... You know dad's "joke" about "the nunnery" that he'd tell whenever you brought boys around the old house? I wonder where he'd want to send ME...*

While only one participant actually uncovered this particular journal entry during the gameplay observation, participants were able to develop an understanding of what Sam was going through by situating experiences revealed by other artifacts within their own. This particular journal reveals the apprehension Sam felt about her family uncovering how she truly felt.

The moment when Sam and her parents finally sit down to talk about Sam's relationship with Lonnie represents one of the more emotionally profound moments in the game, and participants had their own stories that helped them to situate the experiences that Sam was going through. All of the participants in this study reported having friends who have come out to them and acknowledge an overall acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. In each case, participants



attempted to situate Sam's experiences with their own experiences with friends coming out and the acceptance or lack thereof they received from friends and family.

**Jeremy:** *Um, {p} yeah, one of my good buddies, uh, had a hard time with his family when he came out as bisexual for a while. Um, his dad kinda came to with it though and his mom never really, she's like okay. She kinda had the same reaction that I had, which was you know, you're still the same person. I mean, you don't seem like you've changed any or that you're going to change any. But, you know, um, there was some things there and I guess he was kinda the rebel child of it all too. So there were some connections there that I've seen from one of my friends. Um, {p} and the fact that like a parent having kinda a little bit of denial {p} towards that. I guess that's one thing. Yeah, he told me and I was like "okay." He was, "It doesn't bother you?" "No." He's like, "Why's that?" and I was like "because I've been your friend for like 2 years, and I mean you've know how long?" He goes, "For a while," and I go "Okay. Well, you know, you're still my friend." I'm not just going to up and go oh that's disgusting, and up and walk away from you. No, dude. Still my friend. I've had a lot of memories with you and you know a lot of experiences, and I'm not going to just straight drop you because of something like that. That's just stupid. Um, and when he told me his dad was having a hard time, and I was like "well, let's go play a game." You know, hop on the XBox, let's play a game and kinda get your mind off of it. Um, just try to help him out and forget about it. I couldn't ease the problem, but I could help him kinda distract everything.*

Jeremy's story highlights that differing perspectives exist regarding same-sex relationships and how individuals adjust and respond to a family member coming out. Structurally, the way in which Jeremy recreates this experience by replicating what feels like a conversation between his friend and himself stands out here as if the event was significant to him that he can recall the conversation he had. Reassuring his friend that their relationship would not change because he's "still my friend." For Jeremy, his friend's revelation that he is bisexual does not change the nature of how he conceptualized his friend. Additionally, Jeremy's story suggests

the notion that his friend had known for a while and demonstrates his recognition that his friend did not choose to be gay. Gaming as means of distraction is pertinent in this case too, as the concept of video games as a form of escapism emerged for several participants besides Jeremy. Jeremy realizes that even though playing video games would not change how his friend's father feels about his son acknowledging his sexuality, but the temporary escape could help his friend to provide some space and time to alleviate the worries, even for a short time before facing the concern at hand.

Lauren also hits on the same theme seen in Jeremy's story when she recounted how a friend of hers came out to her. She explained, "Me and my friend were totally going to be accepting of it, but I think he was just {p} so terrified that maybe we wouldn't like him after that." This fear of acceptance emerged frequently across participants. Mikey too acknowledged that some of his good friends have come out to him. He added, "My parents are what you call Bible thumpers, well my mom was a Bible thumper and my grandpa was a preacher so they frown upon same-sex stuff. I don't care." I asked Mikey why he believed his perspective on same-sex relationships differed from his parents, he explained, "Well to be honest I'm not a practicing religious person. So, I mean if I guess I was religious I would agree with them, but I'm not religious so... they're happy. Why should I care?" Lauren too had an experience with a friend coming out to her, but noted that she had suspected for a while but had not thought much of it. "I hung out with him like every day before that and every day after that, but {P} it was like a really big shock for me, I think. Which is weird because I did suspect it, but {.} I don't know. It was... {p} I think it was just like a whole new experience, like having someone coming out to you." Just like Mikey, Lauren connected religiousness and lack of open-mindedness especially in regard to her perceived lack of acceptance of LGBTQ individuals among Christians. Lauren explained, "And I'm... raised by a dad who's kinda, pretty religious kind of. Would like me to be more religious and then a mom who just really doesn't... she's just {p} Christian. But she's not doing much about it."

This connection between religion and acceptance emerged frequently across interviews. For example, Mariah reflected on her friend's experience when he came out to his family:

*Um, {p} again I was a theatre kid so half of my friends were {p} struggling with {p} um, coming out to their parents. I have one friend in particular who um, has very religious parents and he feels not {p} like both, he's hidden it for a very long time. At one point they took his phone and read through his text messages and figured it out. And um, I feel so bad for him. He really wants to {p} leave the church and find his own church but his parents think that the church they go to is the only answer. The only correct answer, and so he feels sort of trapped 'cause everyone at his home church knows and will come up to him and say, "Look. You know, this is okay. You just can't act on these feelings." And give him the whole talk and he feels so uncomfortable. (sigh) It's difficult. Him telling me everything, I... oh, that's hard. It's really hard.*

The game of *Gone Home* does not explicitly address the role of religion in the dynamics of the Greenbriar family, but there are subtle clues that can provide some insight. For instance, the Holy Bible can be found three times in the game that belonged to members of the Greenbriar family. One copy can be found displayed on a bookcase in the foyer and another can be found in Terry Greenbriar's bed side table. One of the game's designers, Steve Gaynor, notes in one of the in-game commentaries that the Greenbriar family is not "super religious" but they would feel bad if they put their Bible away. However, the third Bible can be found in Sam's closet, hidden in a box beneath a Lisa Frank style trapper keeper. Per the game's commentary mode, the designers' intention was to imply that perhaps Sam is reexamining her own values as she gets older and that she doesn't necessarily share the same beliefs as her parents.

While Colin acknowledged that he knows a few people who are gay, he admitted that he did not know anything about their experiences coming out or the struggles they may have experienced. This could be due to the fact that Colin was homeschooled, which limited his exposure to peers beyond his homeschooling community of friends. As Colin reflected on a

moment in the game when Sam began to accept that she is gay, he explained, *“I think this is the story of you know, when just all the pieces come together. This is her story of, you know, realization that she's not {p} you know, {p} she's not straight. She's a lesbian. This is her {p} realization, her acceptance, and her how do I, you know, move forward with this?”* A certain level of uncertainty and discomfort can be sensed in Colin’s summary. The frequent pauses and use of “you know” shows some difficulty in his ability to articulate his thoughts on the topic. The other participants had a more directed understanding of what their friends faced when coming out, and as a result their stories and understanding of Sam’s situation in the game are situated and understood through those experiences.

Lauren’s experiences in particular reveal some conflict that exists between her views and those shared by her parents. As we discussed her acceptance and perspective on same-sex relationships like the one depicted between Sam and Lonnie in the game, we began to explore how Lauren’s family felt in comparison to her own personal views. Lauren explained:

*My mom and dad aren't the most accepting; I don't think of it. {p} So. It's a good thing I'm not. Yeah, I feel like they wouldn't want like their own kids to be gay, but I think they're okay with it. I don't know. My mom talks a lot and she doesn't keep things to herself, and I'm just like, “okay.” And she's not the most accepting, so.*

It became clear during our conversations that she had a different world perspective from her parents. I inquired, “So why do you think you’re different?” However, I had not anticipated the sudden change in Lauren’s tone and the contemplative nature of her response.

Lauren responded, *“I- {p} (sigh) I've thought about this so much. I don't know. Um, 'cause {p} I don't know. I feel kind of different from my family. It's weird. I think it's because of all the books I've read {p} or something. I used to read a lot because we had reading goals in like grade school, and I would usually just read series like Junie B Jones and Beverly Cleary. And then once that was done, I'd have to read other books, and I think {p} I just got into some books that like went into some territories that my family never talked to me about. Anything, like, the first book*

*with a gay character was Will Grayson, Will Grayson by John Green... I don't really know what makes me so different from their viewpoints... 'Cause, I don't know. Parents.*

Lauren's exposure to diverse forms of media that provide different perspectives than those to which she had previously been exposed had a significant impact upon her, not just regarding her own sense of identity but in helping her to recognize that the views of her parents do not necessarily have to be her own. Lauren reflected:

*So, I think, honestly, I think I've just had a bunch, like different perspective from them from like books and stuff and like onli-, like I had online media influencing me, like (sigh) I got a Tumblr and then {p} there's a lot of opinions on Tumblr. That I think I just picked up on it. And that was also probably like 13. And I think that's an impressionable age. So.*

The influence of books and digital media for Lauren exposed her to alternative perspectives and showed her that there are a multitude of differing opinions. While she was exposed to these forms of media, she was ultimately the one to decide which opinions and perspectives carried the most value for her.

As students played through *Gone Home* and uncovered Sam and Lonnie's story, it appears that the means in which they construct meaning from the experience is firmly situated in their own experiences. All participants in this study have experienced having a friend deal with the process of coming out to their friends and family. As a result, participants situated and interpreted the hardships that Sam experienced within *Gone Home* using their own personal experiences.

*"I've known since like, She-Ra"*

With the observation that participants were not necessarily reading content that they considered to be inconsequential to the story, I asked each participant to read through four short stories that Sam Greenbriar wrote at various points during her life. All of these stories featured Sam's created characters of Captain Allegra and the First Mate. While there is not a specific sequence in which these stories will be encountered in the game, there is a tendency for certain

stories to be found before others assuming that players fully explore the accessible parts of the first floor of the house before venturing upstairs. All participants in this study did just that and found each of the short stories in the order described below.

**Story 1:** Written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade – found in the living room closet

**Story 2:** Date is unknown (story content suggests it occurs after Story 3) – found in closet of Sam’s room

**Story 3:** Written in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (1992) – found in hall secret compartment (labeled Private! Do Not Read)

**Story 4:** Date is unknown (penmanship suggests it occurs before Story 1) – found on kitchen table

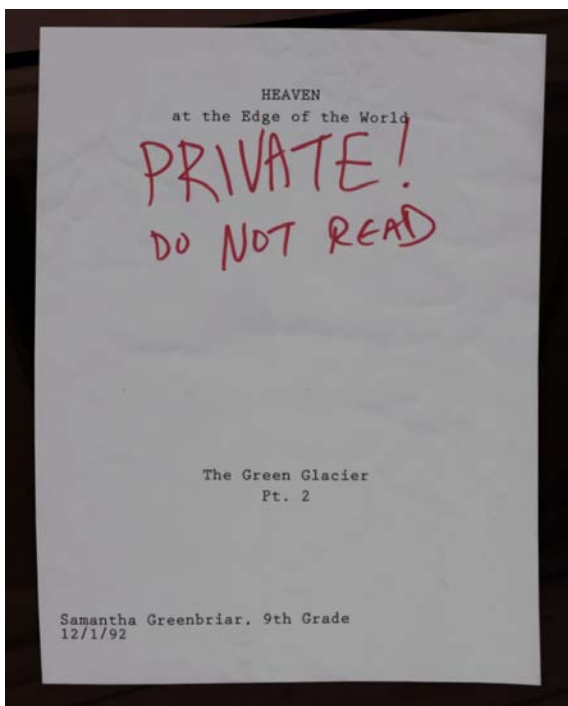
Chronologically, these stories occur in the following sequence: Story 4, Story 1, Story 3, and Story 2.

As was seen in participants’ stories about their own friends coming out to them, participants were largely able understand Sam’s situation from an outside perspective. No participants reported being gay and therefore have never had the experience of coming out to anyone. While most participants have had a friend come out to them, the game allows the player to see things from the other side. They get a brief glance at how Sam felt when her parents did not understand her feelings and identity. In one of Sam’s journal entries written to Katie titled, “A Very Long Phase,” Sam reflects upon the moment that her parents refused to accept how Sam felt towards Lonnie. As with the other journal entries players can find in the game, the character Sam narrates:

*I had an... interesting talk with mom and dad tonight. One YOU'RE never going to need to have. I mean... you've known, right? Like... I'VE known. I've known since like, She-Ra. Mom and dad didn't, I guess. But they saw the zine, and the stuff on the locker, and they were like, "is there something we should know about you and Lonnie?" And so here's the thing. I was prepared for them to be mad, or disappointed, or start crying or something.*

*But they were just in DENIAL. "You're too young to know what you want," "you and Lonnie are just GOOD FRIENDS," "you just haven't met the right BOY..." "It's a PHASE." That's what I didn't see coming. That they wouldn't even respect me enough... to BELIEVE me. Well. Joke's on them. Because they are in for one VERY long phase.*

For Sam, her sexuality has become a fundamental aspect of her identity. While Sam notes that she has known for a while, the game creates the appearance she had her own doubts and fears regarding how others would accept what she had known for a while as a central part of who she



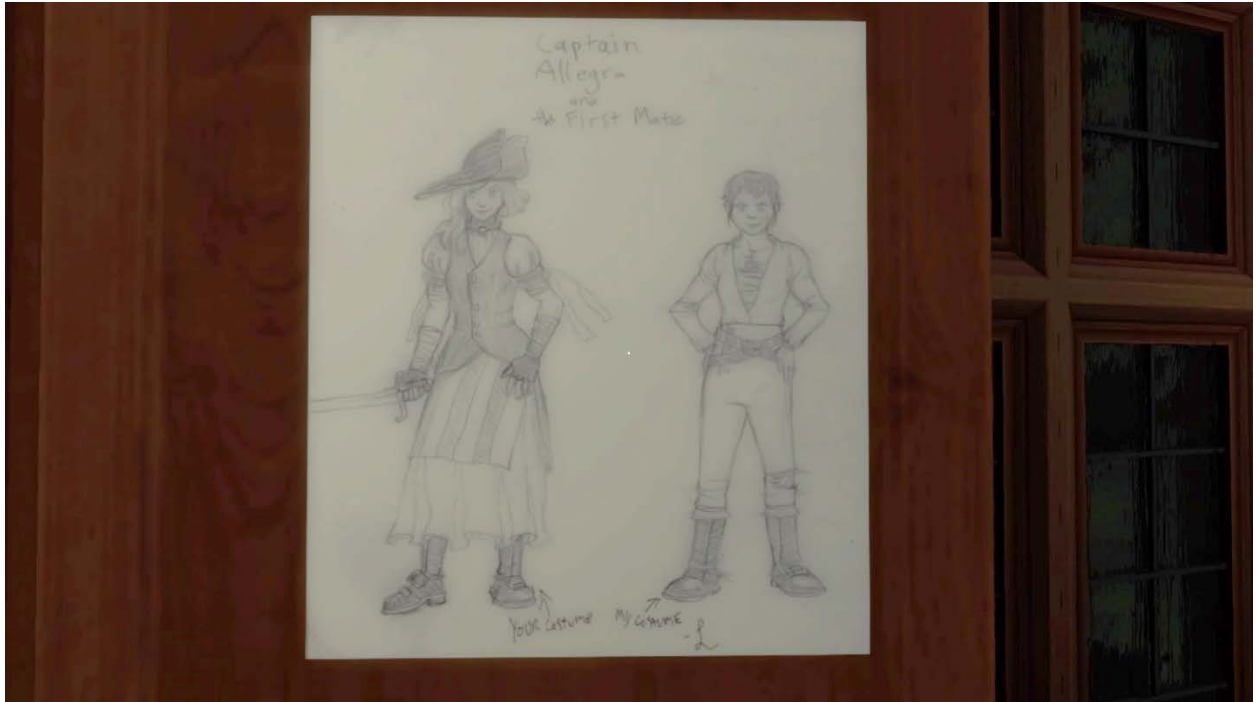
**Figure 5.1 – PRIVATE! DO NOT READ**

is. Story 3, titled “Heaven at the Edge of World,” represents a pivotal aspect of Sam beginning to accept the parts of her identity that she has perhaps tried to suppress over the years. Attentive players might notice that the gender pronouns used for the First Mate in Story 1 and Story 2 are inconsistent. While the First Mate appears as a male in Story 1, the First Mate is suddenly a female in Story 2. The climax of Story 3 reveals why this is the case. Figure 5.1 is the cover page for Story 3, which players find in one of several secret

compartments in the house that players must find in order to progress in the game. In bold, capital letters of red ink is written “PRIVATE! DO NOT READ.”

These fictional stories include reflections of Sam’s identity in the character of Captain Allegra. The First Mate character was originally a reflection of Sam’s childhood friend, Daniel. However, in Story 3, the gender of the First Mate is narratively changed due to a magical event in the story. Many participants assumed that the gender switch of the First Mate must logically be Lonnie. However, Sam did not talk to Lonnie until October 2, 1994 according to the in-game

journal “Best-Laid Plans.” Eventually Lonnie did begin to embody the character of the First Mate as they made costumes of Captain Allegra for Sam and the First Mate for Lonnie as seen in Figure 5.2 below.



**Figure 5.2** – Sam as Captain Allegra and Lonnie as the First Mate

After reading Story 2, Mariah made a connection that the First Mate must be a representation of Lonnie while Captain Allegra represents Sam. After she completed Story 3 where the sudden gender switch occurs, Mariah exclaimed, “Ooh! Okay. Interesting. Well, the First Mate turned into a woman, and Allegra says, ‘That’s the love of my life, and you can’t have her.’ So definitely seein’ the... {p} yeah.”

Mariah noted that the stories were written about “strong and ambitious people” and she felt that this was a good description for Sam.

After reading through the four short stories written by Sam, all participants made the assumption that Sam was integrating aspects of her personal life into her characters and stories. Given that Terry also tended to do this in his own writing (as evidenced by the subject matter and the letter from Richard Greenbriar stating that he could certainly see his son in the writing), it



seemed reasonable to make the connection that Sam was doing something similar with her writing. While most participants made the connection that Sam was Captain Allegra and that the First Mate represented Daniel and Lonnie at various points over time, some participants made additional connections. Colin believed the King was the school principal and Lauren believed that Terry Greenbriar might have been the liar in the first story (perhaps having overheard arguments at home).

After reading Story 3, Colin noted, “That, this part of the story very clearly to me is the moment when she realized (p) I don't like Danny. I don't like Daniel anymore, you know. And this is the point that she realized, "Oh, (p) Lonnie." You know, this is the point when she's starting to realize that you know, she is a hom, homosexual.”

When I presented participants with the fact that Sam would not meet Lonnie until 2 years later, some participants appeared confused and at a loss for an explanation. Even when participants were able to make the connection Sam had had those feelings for a while, this revelation was delivered with surprise or uncertainty in their voice given the upward inflections. Jeremy had previously acknowledged in his story of the time that his friend came out to him, that his friend had known for a long time and that him being open about those feeling would not change their friendship. Even with this personal insight, Jeremy seemed surprised that Lonnie was not the catalyst for the sudden gender swap in Sam's writing. The friendship that developed with Lonnie did help Sam to fully embrace the parts of her identity that she had known had been present for many years.

The piece of the narrative that participants were failing to recognize is that Sam did not suddenly become attracted to girls when she met Lonnie. This was a part of her that she had recognized for a long time; she'd “known since like She-Ra.” This implies that Sam had recognized these aspects of herself before she was a teenager. She did not wake up one morning and decide that she was attracted to girls; this was something Sam had been questioning for some time as evidenced by the changes in her creative writing over time. The evidence was present

within the game that tells the full story, yet participants used their own preconceived notions and beliefs to fill in the gaps that they did not pick up on after their first playthrough. However, participants not only situated Sam's experiences of coming out with their own experiences, the theme of friendship in a broader sense emerged for all of the participants.

### **The Value of Friendship**

The second core theme that emerged across participants was the role of friendship in one's life. The friendship that developed between the characters of Sam and Lonnie emerged as the most prominent aspect of *Gone Home*'s story that participants highlighted in their interviews and during their gameplay observations. Even though the story develops this friendship into a romantic relationship for these characters, participants still tended to latch onto this concept of friendship and belonging as one of the hallmark features of the game's story. Environmental clues exist throughout the game that develop the idea that Sam struggled to make friends, especially after moving to their new house on Arbor Hill. Sam's father, Terry, has struggled to connect with his daughter as evidenced by sternly worded notes written between the two of them at different points in the house. Additionally, a book found in the library off of Terry's study is a book titled *A Stranger Under My Roof* that suggests that her parents were having a hard time knowing how to adjust to life with a teenage daughter who has begun to exhibit a more rebellious side after meeting and eventually befriending Lonnie DeSoto.

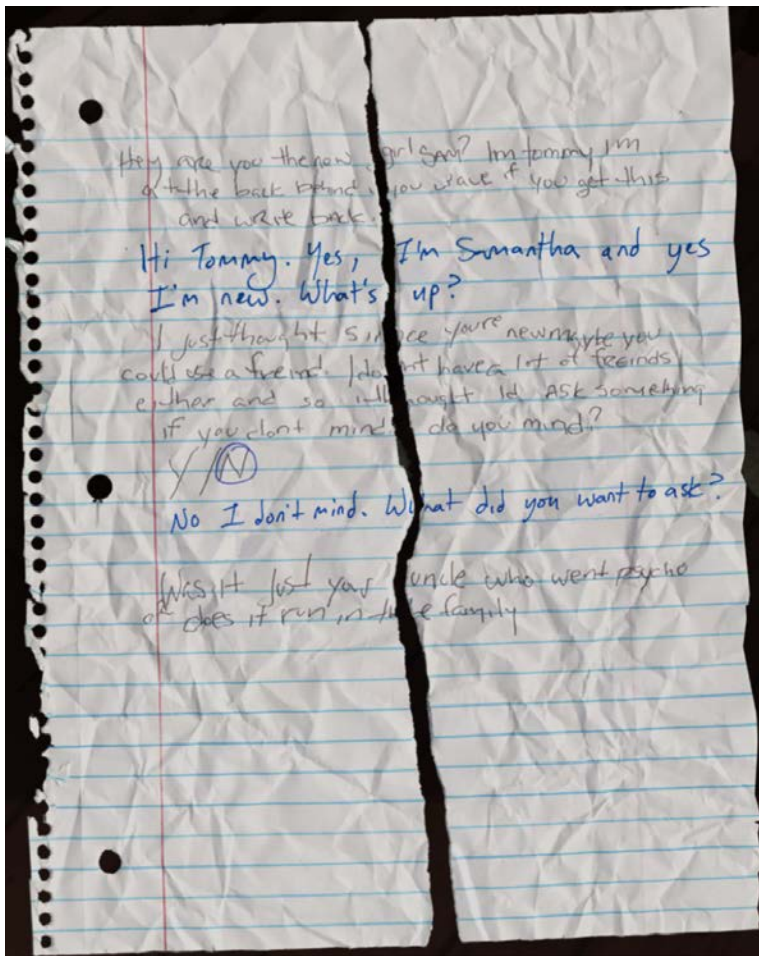
Even looking at the types of stories that participants shared regarding friends who had come out to them, the bonds of friendship came through as core aspect of how participants viewed the situation. When participants were asked what they believed Sam was looking for in her life, nearly across the board participants believed she was looking for friendship and a sense of acceptance. Participants frequently shared anecdotes from their own experiences that served as a means to situate their discussion of Sam's initial struggles to make friends and the ultimate friendship that developed between Sam and Lonnie over the year that Katie studied abroad in Europe. The *Making Friends* book that Terry believed Sam might find helpful sparked reactions

from all participants and many captured a screenshot of the book as a meaningful moment in the game. Lauren shared her thoughts on why parents struggle to understand their kids.

*It's just, parents don't get their kids at that age, I think. And they look to books and stuff instead of talking, so I just think it's funny when it's one of these weird friendship books on growing up because I think my mom got me something like that when I was that age.*

Having had a similar experience to Sam's, Lauren drew upon her own experiences to help her make sense of Sam's situation at home and at school.

Mariah had a similar reaction as she found not only the *Making Friends* book but also a



crumpled note found in the hall trash can. Figure 5.3 shows this note that Sam had received from a fellow student at her school. Initially the exchange appears to be someone reaching out to make friendly contact given that Sam was the new girl at school. Unfortunately, the note writer was simply using this as a ploy to be hurtful to Sam.

After Sam had moved to the strange house on Arbor Hill that people of the area

**Figure 5.3** – The crumpled note in the hall trash

referred to as the Psycho House, Sam struggled to make new friends based upon where she lived. Her great uncle Oscar, who previously owned the house, had withdrawn from society for

unexplained reasons. Since that point, the house has been referred to as the Psycho House in the community. Mariah reflected upon the struggle of friendships during that time in her life.

*And it was sad. Because you don't want to be the person who doesn't have friends... it definitely reminded myself of that sort of time and, you know, the struggle of figuring out yourself and making friends and figuring out which friends are good for you and which friends are not good for you. That, that is a hard lesson to learn.*

In Mariah's reflection, we see the importance of self-identity emerge as a vital aspect of connecting with others during high school and middle school. Mariah considered how difficult making the right friends can be during this time.

*Well, I, I had a pretty solid friend base in high school, but I think in middle school I sorta struggled. 'Cause, um, {p} I was the outcast, I guess (laugh). Well, I wasn't the outcast, I was friends with the outcasts, and therefore I was an outcast because nobody wanted to hang out with me because I was hanging out with them. And, um, I had like maybe two friends in middle school (nervous laugh) that all just sorta stuck together and nobody wanted to hang out with me 'cause I was hanging out with her. And nobody liked her. But I liked her. I thought she was nice, and she was funny and showed me things that I still am interested in to this day. And um, {p} that, that was my friendship, was like two people instead of like a huge group of people. And, you know, it's hard (laugh) when you're in middle school 'cause nobody, no... people are so mean. I feel like middle school's worse than high school. People are mean in middle school. They're brutal. I'm trying to remember how we became friends. 'Cause we met in 6th grade, and in, in my hometown it was 6th grade to 8th grade, that was middle school. And um, {p} must have been in gym or something. I knew we had gym together. And the girls would pick on her in the locker room. And, um, I mean, everyone got picked on in the locker room, but especially her and, um, I, I somehow befriended her and we were best friends throughout middle school until she moved. So, I don't know what our first interaction was. I really don't, which is*

*odd. 'Cause I just feel like she's just sorta always been there. Which is weird. I don't know how we met. (laugh)*

One aspect of Mariah's reflection is that she did not believe that she was truly an outcast. Simply associating with an outcast resulted in her being labeled as such by others. Mariah is not alone regarding her feeling of being a social outcast, as Jeremy also recounted feeling like an outcast in high school but noted he believed he still had a good network of friends.

*I actually, from the people I knew, that were in my grade that were kind of like my sister, um, I noticed that they would {p} backstab anybody to get up on the ladder of popularity. Whereas, my being the outcast, you have no ladder to climb. You don't want to worry about that. You just want to have your friends and be yourselves and not be judged. Um, and the funny thing is, the guy I was really good friends with in high school, that everyone picked on... but no one cared to get to know him. And if they would have, they would have heavily regretted it, because his dad is the drummer for Seether. So I got to hang out with a lot, with the Seether guys a lot of the time. I got to {p} I got to experience a lot of things that no one else got to because they, all they did was judge us. {p} And neglect us. {p} But, I feel like when you're on the outcast side of things, since there's no ladder to climb since you don't care to climb it, they're never worried about getting backstabbed, by your friends. You know, you're always going to be there and support you.*

Jeremy recognized parallels between Sam's experiences and his own and made direct connections to feeling like he didn't belong. Both Mariah and Jeremy noted that their friends deemed as outcasts exposed them to new perspectives and experiences that they would have never had if they had not gotten to know them. Their personal experiences mirror the non-romantic aspect of the friendship between Sam and Lonnie quite well. Early in their relationship, Lonnie exposed Sam to a new genre of music that had a significant impact on her world view. Music from bands such as Heavens to Betsy and Bratmobile that were part of the Riot Grrrl movement of

underground feminist punk that occurred in the 1990's dramatically influenced Sam as a person. She would likely not encounter this experience if she had not befriended the more rebellious Lonnie DeSoto. Therefore, friendships for many participants have helped them to not only feel connected but also provided them with opportunities for unique experiences and alternative perspectives.

The connection to the importance of friendship in one's life is not isolated just to the discussion of the game *Gone Home*. Interestingly, several participants referenced the *Kingdom Hearts* series regarding the "value of friendship." To provide some context, Kingdom Hearts was



**Figure 5.4** – Sora, Donald, and Goofy from *Kingdom Hearts*

a collaboration between Square Enix (the creators of the Final Fantasy RPG series) and Disney. Characters from both *Final Fantasy* and Disney feature as prominent characters in the game while introducing entirely new characters for the *Kingdom Hearts*

game. A boy named Sora finds himself transported to another world in search of his friends Riku and Kairi after a mysterious storm separates them. By chance (or perhaps by destiny as the game suggests), Sora meets Donald Duck and Goofy (see Figure 5.4) who we had been sent by King Mickey to find the wielder of the Keyblade as that individual is essential to defeating the Heartless (people who have lost their hearts) and whoever is trying to control them. This dynamic of Sora's friendships with old friends (Riku and Kairi) and new friends (Donald, Goofy, and others) is central to most of the narrative throughout the *Kingdom Hearts* series. When discussing how *Kingdom Hearts* was an important game for her, Mariah noted, "I think their friendship [between Sora and Kairi] is really important to me because uh, he, he cares. They both care so much about each other. And, you know, I, everyone wants to have a friend like that, to have that connection." I asked Mikey if he ever felt like he learned something from a video game that he

was able to carry with him into the real world. Mikey remarked, “This is going to sound cheesy, but probably the value of friendship... you can't get through things without your friends. And friends to me are important. And like video games kinda like reassured me of that.” It is in this way that video games with strong narratives may reaffirm beliefs already held by the player, or the games can potentially model the type of relationships that a player may hope to develop.

Of all the participants, Colin had the strongest connection to this notion of friendship and game of *Kingdom Hearts*. Colin explained the ways in which *Kingdom Hearts* exemplified the importance of friendship in one's life.

*The theme of friendship will get you places in that game. I mean, you have to make these friend, friendship connections to evolve your character. I mean, without Donald Duck and Goofy, you would never leave Traverse Town. You wouldn't, you wouldn't get anywhere. You would be stuck, on your own, with this key with no idea of what you're doing. {P} And so I think that the big thing to learn from Kingdom Hearts is that friendship will get you places. Without having friendships, I mean you're {p} you're alone, and it's harder to get through the tough times without them.*

When playing *Gone Home*, Colin actually situated the experiences of Sam and Lonnie's friendship into his virtual experiences, the friendships that developed in the game *Kingdom Hearts*. This connection provides a fascinating new implication and emphasizes that previous experiences not only help players to construct meaning while playing, but these previous experiences may in fact be virtual as opposed to an experience at that occurred in reality. A virtual experience may help us to better understand an experience we encounter in our real life. Also of note in Colin's response was this notion of “the tough times.” While he does not elaborate on this, it hints at some personal experiences where friends may have helped him to overcome a difficult situation.

Colin also referred to the friendships that existed in the game *Kingdom Hearts* to explain his relationship with his older brother.

*With the Sora, Donald, and Goofy thing, I feel like that's something I can connect more of me and my friends. Where as with Sora and Riku, I can kinda more connect me and my brother. Cause there was a point in time when the two of us didn't want to talk to each other. I mean, we, we were both young {p} and I, I definitely felt that connection there {p} between the two of us. Where it always felt like he was the one out performing me and he was out there, you know, being cool Riku kinda guy. And then to reconnect {p} afterwards. And for both of us to realize that we made some mistakes along the way and we were idiots, and then to reconnect. It was, I feel that right there, I don't really have a Kairi in {p} my life. But definitely a Riku.*

The relationship between Sora and Riku that develops over the course of *Kingdom Hearts*, the first game in the series especially, provides Colin with a context in which to situate his own relationship with his brother. Colin explains that he and his brother are very competitive and they both tried similar activities growing up.

*We were WAY too into Legos as a kid, as kids. We, we have just mountains of it. And we would always try and be like okay I built the coolest thing. Ever. You'll NEVER do something cooler. And then we both did theatre a lot. And uh, it, it was just a competitive thing between the two of us for the longest time. One of us would find one thing that we like and the other would jump ship to that. And we would compete and then it was just back and forth {p} on that competitive thing. And him being the older brother, I kinda got picked on more than, more than I pick back at him. And so, yeah. It was rough for until I was about 15 or 16 when we all realized, "Hey, we can actually be chill and have fun."*

This description draws directly upon the relationship between Sora and Riku in *Kingdom Hearts* who were friendly but competitive rivals throughout the entire game and at one point find themselves fighting for opposite sides. Eventually Sora and Riku overcome their differences and ultimately try to stop a great evil underway as the series progresses. Colin situated the relationship of Sora and Riku within his own relationship with his brother.



## *The Social Nature of Games*

Across all interviews, participants were asked to reflect upon a time that they felt emotionally connected while playing a video game (this emotional connection theme is explored in the next section). The intention of this question was to explore the role that perspective taking may play when playing video games. What I had not expected, but in hindsight seems quite reasonable, was that participants frequently referenced moments when they felt emotionally connected with the people they were playing the games with as opposed to the characters they played as or interacted with during the game. The social bonds forged while playing games came up for all five of the participants interviewed and observed in this study. In the context of negotiation, video games can create opportunities for players to come together to work towards a common goal setting aside differences. While this study aimed to examine how different perspectives can be negotiated and understood inside the game, it is important to address the finding of the forms of negotiation that can occur outside of the game through the act of cooperation towards a common goal while playing a game.

Even when playing video games that are designed to be single player experiences, sharing that experience with another person appears to have made an impact on many of the participants in this study. What follows are brief snippets from the various interviews that highlight the importance of games as means of connecting with others. First, Lauren highlights how video games can serve as a means of connecting with others through the act of play.

*Me and my little brother used to play... Lego games a lot and they kind of had a storyline. I didn't really connect with those though, it just brought me a lot closer to my little brother. We'd play ALL the time. Like anytime we got out of school, and I think sometimes we played before school (breathy laugh) somehow.*

In this brief exchange, Lauren explains that not all games that tell stories will necessarily result in the player feeling connected to what is occurring in the game. The act of playing with someone else can foster connections with others through the act of playing and working together or

engaging in friendly competition. Mikey too viewed video games as a means of building social connections:

*Gaming was a big thing that they kind of {p} use as a relationship builder. Me and my friends, that's how we would, that's how we became better friends. We'd just go to each other's houses and we'd just have couch gaming marathons. We'd sit on the couch and play games. We played lots of Twisted Metal [a competitive demolition derby]. I eventually got an Xbox, the original Xbox. We played some racing game like Forza... I don't like the Halo series, but I'd say playing Halo 2 with my friend. Because I, I haven't talked, I lost contact with him after I moved, but uh we would play Halo 2 the campaign and I feel like the entire campaign because we were working as a team and not arguing as uh 7 year olds... But, yeah games, even if you're just cooperating with someone in real life and that game is not specifically teaching you the value of friendship, you learn it from playing that game with a friend.*

I asked Mariah to tell me about a time that she felt emotionally invested while playing a video game. Instead of focusing on an emotional connection with a character or a storyline from a game, she instead drew her attention towards the real life connections she has formed with her friends while playing video games.

*Usually when I'm playing a game, I'm invested like in playing with people. I'm emotionally invested in the relationship with the people I'm playing with. Like I grew up playing, um, Smash Bros Brawl with my brothers and the Melee and I was emotionally invested in getting to spend time with them and not necessarily (sigh) beating everyone at the game. Because I was terrible. They would always kick my ass and it was embarrassing. But, I loved being Yoshi and I always Yoshi or Samus. Every time. And, I, I think my emotional connections with video games are with the surroundings not necessarily the games themselves.*

The emotional connections that Mariah made through video games came from the act of playing the game with others. In the case of more narrative-focused games, which Mariah noted that she has not had much exposure with, she did demonstrate some level of understanding and compassion for the virtual characters she learned about as well. This suggests that these sort of games may carry some promise of fostering these emotional connections and the development of understanding diverse perspectives, both inside and outside the virtual world.

When asked the same question regarding a time he felt emotionally invested while playing a video game, Colin also told the story of him playing the game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* with his older brother. This game tells the story of two brothers that must go on a journey to find a cure for their ailing father. The player controls both brothers at the same time with each stick of the controller representing one of the two brothers. Even though this is a single player game, Colin and his brother would take turns passing the controller back and forth, as they completed different puzzles and levels together. When I asked him how playing the game with someone else affected the experience, Colin explained:

*I think it made the experience better. I mean, {p} I think playing that really help me and him kinda stay close. I think playing it together just really helped us both see how that loss might affect either one of us. If that were to ever happen. I, I think it was a great experience to play that with him.*

And finally, Jeremy also connected with the ways in which playing games with friends brought them *closer together*.

*[Referencing the Street Fighter combo moves written on a piece of paper found in the game] Yeah, um. My old high school, my old uh buddy who I was friends with for like a decade or so. Me and him always did fighting games, uh, whether it was Killer Instinct, Mortal Kombat, um. Just anything like Street Fighter any of those sorts. Um. That was just one of the games we always played and connected on that wasn't a first person shooter. So I kinda look back on all the things, and I just kinda laughed to myself because*

*I can still hear him. "You button mashing freak is the only way you win anything." "Yeah because I can break the game and you can't."*

In each of these scenarios, the players is negotiating on some level with the friends and family they play with. It seems that connecting with others while playing together is an important element of why some of the participants in this study play games. Having an additional voice and perspective involved while playing could potentially have an impact on the overall experience that a player has.

### **Adjusting to Change**

A third theme that emerged as students attempted to construct their own understanding of the events that transpired over the course of playing *Gone Home*, was the idea of adjusting to significant changes in one's life. Whether it be leaving the family home and moving on to do other things or adjusting to the new challenges of college life, participants connected their own feelings of adjusting to new changes. Mikey connected his experiences of moving frequently as a kid to understand Sam's difficulty transitioning to a new high school after her family moved.

*I've moved a lot in my life. Like I've moved from all over Oklahoma and lived in Tulsa, er Texas for most of high school. Uh, but when I moved to Texas, a lot of people didn't really care for me because of my aunt. My aunt was the librarian there. They loved my aunt to death, but they felt like I was going to try to ride off the fact that they loved my aunt. So they were, they didn't like me because I lived at my aunt and uncle's house and they felt like I wasn't, {p} I was just going to, be a not good person. They had sold us the, our, their house, but we moved a lot because my dad's in the oil field. And every now and then the oil field goes down and he gets let off. And he goes to the next job. So. The only time I didn't enjoy it, was the last move. Cause I, I was always picked on in school until I moved to Texas.*

Mikey connects his experiences of moving to a new school and being judged by others based upon where he lived. Others made assumptions about who Mikey might be simply based upon the limited information they have about him.

During our interview, Lauren mistakenly believed that Kaitlin had been moved out of her room when she went off to study abroad. However, Kaitlin's family had actually moved to an entirely new house during her time in Europe and her parents had never found the time to put together her room. Therefore, when the player comes upon the undecorated room that would be Kaitlin's room with files of boxes stacked both in the room and closet, it created the appearance that Kaitlin had been moved out. Even with this misunderstanding of the context, Lauren experienced a personal connection between her own lived experience of moving out from home as a college student and what she perceived to be Kaitlin's similar experience.

**Lauren:** *I didn't like the responsibility she [Kaitlin Greenbriar] was feeling for her younger sist..., her like, yeah, younger sister too much. I kind of felt a connection whenever they, like, cleaned out her room. Like completely because that's kind of what we did for me. And it just, it felt weird like seeing another person's room like that. Like feeling that perspective because it's like I felt it twice, in two different ways.*

*We basically cleaned out my whole room. And stuff like that... but I think it's also sort of a guest room now. And I think they did the same thing with my older brother because we both moved out at the same time, and his room was a guest room to start with and then he moved in, so I think both of our rooms like kind of went through a transformation. So, seeing her room like that it's kind of weird though because she {p} she just went away for like a year and she came back. So I don't know why they would clean out her entire room.*

In this scenario, Lauren did not understand the full context of the game. The player is responsible for piecing together why things are the way they are within the house they explore. Without making the connection that the family had only recently moved into this house, which was entirely unfamiliar to Kaitlin, Lauren attempted to utilize her own experiences of moving out

when going off to college as a means of filling in the gaps and understanding the condition of Kaitlin's empty room. Even with this misunderstanding of the situation within the game, Lauren still drew upon her own experiences to make sense of what she believed was occurring within the game.

The act of moving out of one's childhood home is quite common for students as they venture off to college. When I was an undergraduate, I experienced the same weirdness of moving out of my room of my parent's house, but it wasn't until I moved off to graduate school that my room slowly morphed into some nebulous space that was simultaneously my room and not my room any longer. The adjustment to this sort of change in their life served as a point of connection for most participants. For example, Jeremy connected Sam's struggles to connect with others after moving to a new school.

*I think [Sam] was looking for friends in a new area. But because of where she lived, she was already {p} labeled with something before anyone got to know her. So that kinda crippled her. And making friends, which was really {p} sad to read about. {p} But, I think it's one of those things. She started owning it, like okay I'm the Psycho Girl living in the Psycho House. Once she had some confidence about it, I think that's when people were warming up to her. And that's all it really takes in life is a little bit of confidence behind anything.*

Jeremy's focus on building confidence and "owning" one's identity directly connects to his own life experiences, which will be discussed in more detail later. During his individual interview, Jeremy' openly shared many hardships that he faced in high school and how he has managed to move on from those troubling experiences of his past. His tone in his short narrative above is one of hope and reassurance that things are going to be okay for Sam.

This optimism in spite of difficult transitions can also be seen in Colin's reflection upon how he adjusted from being a home schooled student to attending a public university in relation to difficulties that Sam went through as she tried to adjust to her new school.

*My entire life until college, you know. I took every class at home or with a group of friends whose parent would teach us or I'd study and take a CLEP test. And then here, you know, it's, the teachers are provided for you. You have all these resources available to you, and you have all these deadlines {p} that you don't really have as a home schooler... there were some days where I slept in past my 7:30am class, but uh, it eventually, I adjusted and {p} it, it was, it was a gradual shift. It was {p} about halfway through the first semester that I think I really fully shifted into gear.*

Even in the face of a brand new experience, moving to an entirely different state to attend college, Colin expressed through his story that the challenge could always be overcome with persistence and making adjustments.

In Chapter 4, Jeremy's reaction to finding Sam's college acceptance letter and her scholarship award was discussed regarding how he projected himself into the sibling role during the moment. However, Jeremy discussed how he had been struggling to pay for his own college education. He had just recently sold his truck and would signing up for ROTC as means of paying for his schooling. Just as Sam's life would be filled with change, Jeremy connected with this moment as he reflected upon the recent changes in his own life. However, Jeremy's response was mixed with both pride and envy; pride in the sense that he would feel that way if his own sister had brought how much good news and envy in that he wishes he would be as fortunate. Of course, Jeremy chalks this up to to a matter of luck as he remarks, *"She's lucky. She's got most of that covered, and I'm sitting over here with like student debt and having to go into the military to get my stuff covered for. So I was like, if I had that. Mmmm. (laugh)."*

### **Emotionally Connecting to a Virtual Person**

Beyond the moments described previously that exemplified ways in which the participants were able to embrace alternative perspectives, there were a number of moments for which participants described themselves as having an emotional connection. This emotional connection that players exhibited with these virtual characters serves as this study's fourth theme.

During our interview, Lauren suggested that there is value in immersing yourself in a story that may be unfamiliar to you or that may differ from your own lived experiences.

*I think there is because {p} if I just played what I was familiar with then I'd never change, like any of my ideologies or anything. So, pla-, and I've seen like, families like this a lot in media {?} so it's not like it was anything super new to me, but I think it's good to play games, watch movies, or read books with like characters that you don't connect with. But I also think, it's really nice after you've like read a bunch of things that you don't connect with that you finally do connect with. And I think they both matter a lot in terms of like character growth.*

Lauren's reflection proposes the value of gaining exposure to the perspectives of others that may be different from our own. Even though we may not connect with a character or a person in reality, as we learn more about these individuals we may begin to appreciate difference and that we ourselves may grow from these encounters.

Lauren acknowledges that this can occur through a variety of media types besides just video games. However, there are unique qualities to video games that distinguish games from other media such as movies and books. This can be seen as Mariah comments about the power of games to tell stories.

*And also it's a whole different genre of storytelling, I think. Cause it, it's not {p} a story is being told at you, you're kinda in the story. Or at least observing it from a different perspective than third party which is what a lot of movies and books do. Um, you get to have like a, it's a visual book basically (laugh), which is interesting and I think that's why I play games. Well, I just think um, that's interesting it's just another way to sort of {p} I, I think that would be cool if you could play a video game from different perspectives. Cause you're getting the same story but from two different ways. And I think the two different ways you get the story make you round out the story to begin with, and sorta*



*take it in. I think that's cool... Like from different perspectives. Getting to see how other people think, I guess.*

Being inside the story as Mariah describes and being immersed in the game experience is what distinguishes video games as a unique storytelling medium. Echoing this concept, Colin noted that “there's a difference between seeing and doing. You know, when you have to physically do these things. I feel like it makes a deeper connection between the player and the character.”

Jeremy pinpointed that this sense of being an active player as you uncover clues while playing a game like *Gone Home* is key to the immersive experience. As Mikey describes it, the experience unique to video games is the interaction. “When you add, like, user input and character development together in the same thing, it becomes so much more or it becomes its own thing.”

The player has the responsibility to uncover the story and as Mariah stated, “It's like a mystery. You're putting the pieces together.” Whether players “solve” the mystery of *Gone Home* depends squarely on the players themselves. The player’s attention to detail and ability to make his or her own inferences and deductions along the way is what drives the immersive nature of *Gone Home*. This provides important context for understanding the process through which students emotionally connected with characters in a video game.

However, just because a player feels immersed and involved in the game’s story does not ensure that an emotional connection will necessarily occur. Colin noted that he cared about Sam and what would happen to her, but he struggled to make of a connection to any of the other characters in *Gone Home* beyond understanding Terry’s struggle. Even though Colin believed he played the game as if he truly was Kaitlin, he did not develop a connection with the character he embodied over his time playing.

During the interview portion of the study, I asked participants to imagine what a character must have been experiencing emotionally as their backstories unfolded over the course of the game. Jeremy had situated how Sam must have felt by situating her experience with his own feelings of being an outcast in high school even though did have a good network of friends

that were also considered outcasts. For him, when he accepted that he was viewed as an outcast, he felt a sense of relief that he no longer had to worry about climbing socially and that he could truly be himself. Jeremy went to on to explain how he felt connected to Sam in a way because she too was looking to make a friend whom she could trust. After Sam's family moved to the "Psycho House" that Terry inherited from his uncle Oscar, students at Sam's new high school were not kind to her. Jeremy explained:

*But because of where she lived, she was already labeled [Psycho House Girl] with something before anyone got to know her. So that kinda crippled her. And making friends, which was really {p} sad to read about. {p} But, I think it's one of those things. She started owning it, like okay I'm the Psycho Girl living in the Psycho House. Once she had some confidence about it, I think that's when people were warming up to her. And that's all it really takes in life is a little bit of confidence behind anything.*

What appeared over and over during the interviews was that students' ability to connect with a video game character tied directly to their ability to connect their own experiences with that character. As previously illustrated, the study participants consistently situated their video experiences with their lived experiences. Jeremy's mention of "owning" the "Psycho House Girl" label that others gave to Sam connects directly to his own coming to terms with his label of "The Beast."

Just as Jeremy used his own experiences to connect with a character, Lauren had a unique connection to a video game character and the game's story that helped spark aspects of her interests in writing.

*I used to play a lot of the Imagine DS games {?} Like in that series, there was this Imagine Detective game, and I think I've always been into like mystery. So, (sigh) {p} I think, her character, I don't know. She wasn't like the coolest in the school, I think, and there was like the popular girls. And I read a lot of books with like the popular girls over there and lame-o like right here or something like that. And so I think I kinda connected*

*with like, that, like the outsider kind of thing. {p} A little bit. And that was like one of the books, like the first book I wrote, was in 6th grade for like an assignment and mine was a mystery. And I kinda based it, it was inspired by that game, so that game kinda means a lot to me because I know that's kinda what sparked the whole writing thing.*

Lauren connected her own social status in school and playing the *Imagine Detective* game allowed her to explore her own identity through the writing it inspired. Mariah also appears to have drawn from her own experiences and perspectives as she tried to imagine herself actually receiving the *Making Friends* book that Terry gave to Sam.

*I would've been embarrassed and I would've been like, "Huhhh, Daaad! Gave me this book! Ugh!" (exaggerated tone) And then I'd like hide it in my room somewhere, and then at some point I would be like, "You know, maybe I need to look at that book," and sorta read it on my own. With, try to not let my dad realize that I found it helpful. (laugh) Yes, but I feel like {p} especially since it still had the sticky note on it and it was in the living room, she didn't find it very helpful. It was sorta like, um, {p} her dad was trying but {p} wasn't. Like he was just doing what he thought he should do instead of like doing what he thought she would have wanted. So he was, sort of {p} I'm trying to explain this in a way. Um, not taking her into consideration, I think. Sort of putting a blanket on the whole issue, and hoping it was fine.*

What is so fascinating about Mariah's account is not just her initial reaction to receiving the book but also the detailed actions she believes she would have personally taken. Her realization that, "You know, maybe I need to look at that book," is particularly profound. Even though she believes Sam may have not found the book to be helpful, Mariah acknowledges that perhaps, in secret, she would have found some benefit from the gesture.

One final example from *Gone Home* comes after Jeremy found a note from Lonnie to Sam that appears to have been run through the washer and dryer. Jeremy experienced a moment

of understanding of what Lonnie had been going through and how Sam must have felt receiving that note.

**Jeremy:** *It had (sigh) {P} it kinda went into Lonnie's backstory of why, you know, she went into the army is because she grew up with that, that's all she really knows. That's all she ever wanted to do. And um, {P} she was basically like, I'm doing this. You're going to college. It's just not going to work kinda a deal. It's kinda like, wow. {p} It, it was blunt. And it was deep and blunt to a point. And it was just kinda out of left field from the story. Like you {p} I also didn't see that coming. Like it actually surprised me in that a little.*

**Shawn:** *What surprised you the most?*

**Jeremy:** *The fact that Lonnie would, was like yeah, I'm going to put my {p} you know, go live your life and I'll go live mine. Good luck to you. And just would take off after {p} all that it was just wow.*

Moments when the participants reported feeling emotionally connected with a character from a game was not exclusive to the game *Gone Home*. For example, while playing *Life is Strange*, Lauren reported that she believes she felt what a character was feeling. As she played as Max Caulfield, Max would share her own thoughts through internal monologues. Lauren explained:

*And I think it's mostly because she had thoughts, like her own thoughts throughout the whole thing, and that helped a lot, but... {p} I think I just put myself in the character's shoes and I feel what they're feeling when I play.*

Similarly, Colin believed that he felt how the characters in *Kingdom Hearts* felt during an emotional and surprising moment of the game.

*In Kingdom Hearts II when Goofy gets hit by the rock. And you're, it, it makes you think that you've lost Goofy. That you, that he's gone, dead. That, that always stuck with me. That scene right there, you know. You get to see the attachment of Sora and Donald and*

*Mickey to Goofy, and how close they are and how they all are just angry with, with the Heartless at that point in time. Th, that moment always sticks with me.*

Reflecting upon my own reaction during this moment from *Kingdom Hearts II*, seeing Sora, Donald, and Mickey briefly grieve over their perceived loss of their friend is moving (Figure 5.5),



**Figure 5.5** – Mourning the “death” of Goofy from *Kingdom Hearts II*

especially when you see the anger and intensity that occurs within Mickey Mouse, which is so uncharacteristic for that particular character. It is a moving scene, though in spite of that, part of me knew that Goofy was not truly dead. Yet seeing all of Goofy’s friends take charge with the newfound motivation to avenge his death is

quite powerful and memorable. Colin had talked in his interview about the developing friendship between Donald and Goofy with the main protagonist, Sora, and seeing that dynamic disrupted, even though it did not last, resulted in an emotional connection. Having an emotional connection while engaged in interactive video game narratives appears to be connected significantly to the characters a player experiences within the game and the bond that may form through the act of playing. At this point in the *Kingdom Hearts* series, players have spent hours upon hours with these characters and have become invested in their success and happiness. These games can develop a connection with the player as they witness these characters develop and grow over the course of the game.

While discussing the game *Kingdom Hearts*, a member of a focus group reflected on a sacrifice that the main character, Sora, made to save his friend Kairi.

**Focus Group Participant 1:** *I almost cried when he turned himself into a Heartless.*

**Focus Group Participant 2:** *We're not going to go there. We're not going to go there right now [laughter]. It's too emotional.*

With the connections that others had made to characters in video games, an important exchange occurred when discussing Colin's emotional response when playing the game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. He recounted a meaningful experience that he had while playing this game with his older brother, but as we discussed the notion of taking on another person's perspective through a video game, some revealing insights came to light.

**Colin:** *That one was emotionally taxing. I mean, first off you got an older brother and a younger brother. There's a connection there already. Um, and then you get invested in trying to save the father's life. And then the brother dies. It just rips your heart out when you get there. Because you've spent all this time helping the brothers work as a team and helping them to like really make this relationship of theirs work. And the, I feel that the two get really close right up towards the end when the brother gets stabbed. And then obviously the scene where you have to pull him into the grave, it just {p} it really got to me on that one.*

Colin elaborated that as the brothers enter the spider's lair as a part of their journey, one of the brothers is attacked and badly injured. The player then must carry the older brother on the shoulders of the younger brother to escape harm. As the player hurriedly directs the younger to retrieve water from the fountain that would save his brothers life.

**Colin:** *But when you get back, he's no longer even sitting there. He, he's dead. And no amount of this magic water can bring him back from death. And, then when it, when it fades out and fades back in with the younger brother just digging the grave, phew... man, that... it's getting to me now.*

Colin's voice cracks as he remembers the events that transpired in the game. It became evident that this event in the game had an emotional impact upon him.

**Colin:** *And the fact that they make you put dirt back on, and you, you can't move on until you've buried him. {p} And then you have to go the, the way back to your home with just the younger brother. And you, and your younger brother is strong enough to do these things that he couldn't do before. You know, the death of his older brother pushed him to be stronger and now he can, he*

*can turn these levers that he wasn't strong enough to before. He can, he can climb this ladder without his brother's help, he can swim now when he couldn't do any of these things alone before. You had to have the older brother help him or have the older brother give him a boost. And it's very emotional right there. When, when you get back home and you have to put another {p} grave there, beside your mother's for him.*

Of particular note in this last portion of Colin's recap of the experience is the fact that he had to physically bury one of the two characters he played as over the entire game, one brother burying the other. This illustrates the interactivity can exist with the video game medium as tool for creating emotion.

However, when we turn the focus of the conversation towards his ability to take on the perspective of one of the brothers in the game, Colin begins to show a different interpretation of that particular gaming experience.

**Shawn:** *[While playing Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons] did you feel like you were able to take on his perspective and kind of understand what he's going through in that moment?*

**Colin:** *I don't think I could take on his perspective fully. Cause to assume that perspective, would for me, would be for me for me to think, my brother's dead. And {p} where I was, when I played it I, I just couldn't picture that. Like I couldn't be in his shoes there. That was his sorrow, his problem. That was his thing that I can {p} I can be empathetic for him, I can feel for him, but I can't be him. Because I just think that would be a little too much.*

For Colin, experiencing this emotional experience brought him too close to the implications that such an experience would carry in reality. It is easier to distance one's self from the virtual experience knowing that does not impact a real person. In instances when Colin consciously attempted to empathize and image what the younger brother must be feeling, that imaginative exercise of putting himself into the full embodied experiences of the character became too "emotionally taxing." In those instances, he distances himself by assigning ownership

of the problem to the character and not to himself as the player. I probed further to better understand his point of view:

**Shawn:** *But I mean, I guess you could argue that perspective taking is not the same as being that person, but trying to view it from their point of view... Do, do you see it differently than that?*

**Colin:** *A little bit.*

**Shawn:** *Okay, how would you describe it then?*

**Colin:** *I mean, I can, I can feel {p} sorry for that character, I can, I can connect to that character's pain. Cause of losing a loved one but I can't {p} I can't put myself fully there. That, I feel I would be committing too much of my emotion to that character that I can't let it, I physically cannot produce, I cannot physically produce the emotion {p} that he must be going through with a loss of a brother.*

What Colin is describing here is more of a case for experiencing sympathy as opposed to empathy. This was an intriguing viewpoint that he felt sorry for the character. I pointed out that it definitely seemed as if he had an emotional reaction to what he experienced in the game *Brothers*.

**Colin:** *Yes, definitely. When you're playing through it you played it as both brothers. One side of the controller is one [brother] and the other side is the other [brother], and you have to work with both of them. And then {p} it, it's like half of you is gone.*

**Shawn:** *How did you feel in that moment when you were seeing this? Obviously you don't know what it's like to lose a brother and to have to bury your own brother in a field, but how would you describe your mood and your kind of emotional state at that point?*

**Colin:** *I was devastated at that point. I mean, having, having felt like me and my brother were those brothers for most of the game, because we love puzzle solving and we love, we love any game that has that kind of puzzling and platforming. And it, it was {p} like a piece of me was gone at the time. I mean, {p} I'd, I'd spent so much time working on these two brothers and making sure they were you know {p} surviving all these obstacles together. To lose {p} half of*



*who you're playing as, it's like half of you is missing now... Like I feel a little bit of their pain and I can sort of picture what they're going through. But at the same time I can't fully be there.*

The distinction between sympathy and empathy is of central importance here. According to Wispé (1986), sympathy is an increased awareness of the difficulties another person faces with an emphasis on alleviating the negative situation. Empathy, on the other hand, is an attempt of one person to understand the subjective experiences (either positive or negative) of another person through the imaginal processes such as perspective taking. While sympathy focuses on relating, empathy focuses on knowing and understanding (Wispé, 1986). From Colin's perspective, one must have truly experienced a similar event in order to understand the perspective of someone else. However, Colin was the only participant that voiced this particular perspective among the students who participated in this study. Even if Colin was unable to completely feel what losing a brother felt like in his own reality, he did exhibit some level of concern and could relate to the pain of the experience. The question that remains is whether this ability to relate to or understand the emotions and experiences of others through a virtual medium will have any form of carry over into the player's real life. In the current study a conclusive determination cannot be made, but the preliminary findings seem promising.

Two specific scenarios that reinforce this theme of emotional connection in video games will be examined to explore the emotional connections that participants appear to have made while playing *Gone Home* along with another narrative-focused video game that came up frequently during data collection, *Life is Strange*. The tendency to utilize our own biases and assumptions to attempt to understand a situation occurred prominently regarding the belief that Sam might be trying harm herself.

### *The Mistaken Suicide*

No scene in *Gone Home* sparked a bigger reaction from participants than the upstairs bathroom outside of Sam's bedroom. Upon entering the dark bathroom, the player will eventually notice that red splotches cover different parts of the bathtub.



**Figure 5.6** – The bottle of red hair dye by the “bloody” bath tub

Only upon further investigation does the player find a bottle of red hair dye sitting next to the tub (Figure 5.6). Of particular importance about this scene is how players interpreted it before discovering the true nature of the red stains. Below are excerpts from the participants’ reactions to finding the “bloody” bathtub and their initial interpretations of the scene:

**Mikey:** *I was like, that's blood. Why is there blood in the tub (laughing)? I just automatically, I didn't think it could be anything else. I was like, I don't, there's nobody here and all of a sudden there's red stuff on the tub. Why is there red stuff on the tub?*

**Shawn:** *And whose blood did you think it might be?*

**Mikey:** *I didn't know. That's why I was like wait, did the mother kill the father? Did the sister kill somebody? Did the sister kill herself? I don't know. And then I saw the hair dye, and I was "Okay. Okay, this is much better."*

**Lauren:** *I thought it was blood {?}, because I really thought it was going to a point where Sam was going to kill herself. And I thought that was part of it. And then I found out that she and Lonnie were just dyeing hair. {?}*

**Mariah:** *Um, I had, I thought that she [Sam] had {p} ended her own life. That, that but then I was like, but where's the body? And so {p} it was like a little, did her parents find her and take her to the hospital. Is that why they're not home? Is it this? Is it {p} I don't know. Was it Lonnie? Did Lonnie help her? But no. It was just hair dye (breathy laugh)*

**Shawn:** *Why, why do you think that Sam might, or that thought that she might hurt herself, why do you think Sam would have a reason to?*

**Mariah:** *Well, when she felt like she didn't have any friends and when you're alone it's much easier to go to a darker part of your own brain and have those thoughts and have that voice talk to you. And, um, being not accepted by her parents would have also been, I don't think it had happened yet though. I don't think. The fear of her parents not accepting her would have also been {p} motivation I suppose. The fear of not having anyone accept you, 'cause in that time it was sort of dicey. So that would have been my guess as to why she would have done it.*

**Colin:** *Uh, I walked in and I saw the, I saw the red in the bath tub and I was like, Alfred Hitchcock. You know, we've got, we got the murder in the tub. We've got the chocolate syrup pouring down the drain.*

*And I was like, uh huh. This is a horror game. {p} No. It's fake. This is one of the moments where it really solidified, oh it's not what I thought it was. Just like, just like the red in the tub, {p} this game is not what it appears to be. It's, it's very much not what your first impression is {p} is going with. It, it's got a second {p} objective here.*

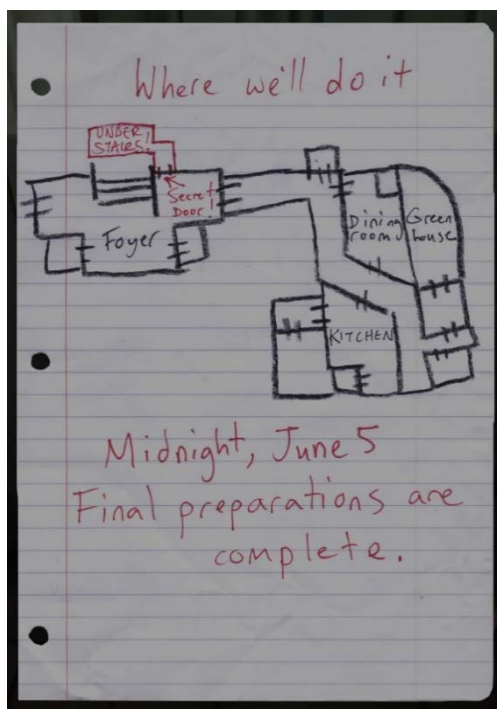
**Shawn:** *Right. So when you saw the blood or what appeared to be blood, whose blood did you think that was going to be?*

**Colin:** *I presumed either Samantha or Lonnie.*

**Shawn:** *And why is that?*

**Colin:** *Uh, well I, it, up until the final moment of revelation of, "oh, she ran away," I presumed that it was going to be Lonnie's suicide. Lonnie or Samantha's suicide story. It felt very much like she, she wanted to end {p} to end it and um {p} so I just presumed it was one of those two characters.*

As Colin described his rationale for why he believed it was suicide, I could sense his discomfort not only in his frequent pauses and awkward delivery but also his body language. Yet he was not alone in thinking that Sam, Lonnie, or both may have harmed themselves in some way. The question is why did so many of the participants have such a similar reaction to discovering the bathroom scene and why did they jump to the idea that self-harm might be involved? It should be noted that *Gone Home* does toy with player expectations. The game occurs



**Figure 5.7** – “Where we’ll do it”

in the middle of the night during a heavy rainstorm. The lights of the old house flicker consistently and the house groans and creaks throughout the game. Sam’s notebook about ghost sightings in the house, the use of a Ouija board to try to contact a dead relative, and the simple fact that no one is home when they should be all create the feeling that this might be a spooky or horror-filled game. However, as the participants made their way through the story, they began to realize that their initial impressions were very wrong. There are no ghosts or demons lurking in the shadow. This is a game grounded in reality.

Colin’s belief that Sam and Lonnie might commit suicide was further supported when he found the note in Figure 5.7. “I mean, you have this series of notes, and suicide victims often leave notes. It just, it solidified in my mind that this was going to lead to a suicide.” With the note stating “Where we’ll do it,” it created the thought that “it” might be a sinister act. While Colin did

not take a screenshot of the attic door surrounded in red Christmas lights, he had a strong reaction to seeing it for the first time and when he was about to open the locked attic entrance once he had found the key. He was worried about what he would find inside as the idea that he might find that Sam had killed herself returned to his mind.

Colin was not alone as the attic created a great deal of concern for most participants. Four out of five participants had concerns that they would find that Sam had killed herself in the attic. For example, Lauren attributed Sam's difficulty making friends following the move, discovering her sexuality and the lack of acceptance Sam felt, along with the prospect of her relationship with Lonnie potentially ending as Lonnie was about to ship out after enlisting in the military all contributed to the belief that Sam might try to do some sort of harm to herself. The rate of suicide attempts among LGBTQ youth is statistically higher than other comparable groups according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017). Coupled with media coverage in the past several associated with bullying and attempted suicide among LGBTQ youth, many of the participants were likely exposed to this idea (Haas, 2017). Mikey and Colin were both filled with a sense of dread as they made their way to game's final location, the locked attic (Figure 5.8):

**Mikey:** *When it's building up to you thinking that you're going to go upstairs and you're going to find what you don't want to find. That, that's, that's the most moment that I was like, no, don't do this to me. I don't like it when things die in games. Especially when you've built this relationship. Because the way the words she was using. She was like I feel at peace up there. I just want to go up there and sleep for a long time. And I was just like, no.*

**Shawn:** *But why do you think um if it {p} you know, if you were afraid that Sam was going to do something, why do you think she would have done something to harm herself?*

**Mikey:** *Because she was truly in love with Lonnie and she, I mean, she was losing control of her life faster than she could honestly keep track of and {p} I was like "no, I don't want her to do that."*



**Figure 5.8** – The final game location: The attic

**Colin:** *I was expecting to find a body. I was expecting to find a body, maybe a knife or a rope. Just any, any other details of the suicide. Because this, this just feels like the final nail in the coffin of {p} what this story was leading up to be. {p} And then I didn't find any of it. I mean, you find the secret hide out. You find the final note {p} and the final, the final audio clue... I was relieved. I mean, I, I was just happy that it wasn't suicide. At the time, I was {p} I was just, "okay, coming out of shock now." And this isn't quite what I thought it was.*

Jeremy was the only participant that did not contemplate the idea that Sam or Lonnie might be attempting to commit suicide. However, what makes this particularly noteworthy is that Jeremy admits to scaring easily. He hates watching horror movies that his girlfriend loves so much, and noticeably jumped and became agitated when faced with even the potential that something horror or supernatural might be occurring in the game. When Jeremy found the “Where we’ll do it” note shown in Figure 5.7, he was more concerned about something jumping out from the secret passage under the stairs that the map directed him toward. He also acknowledged his conservative Christian religious beliefs influence a great deal of how he lives

and interprets the world. As such, he had strong reactions when he encountered a Ouija board and a séance scene beneath the stairs. He jokingly remarked, “The last thing I want is a demon in my life (laugh).”

I will fully admit that when I first played *Gone Home*, I had a similar experience to that of Lauren, Mariah, Colin, and Mikey. First discovering the bathtub covered in the hair dye “blood” made me question whether Sam might have tried to cut herself given the difficulties she had stated regarding making friends at school. Perhaps her friendship with Lonnie took a very sad turn and Sam ended up feeling lost, alone, and depressed. When it appeared that Lonnie and Sam were going their separate ways with Lonnie joining the Army and Sam going off to college, my fears began to return. Flashes of seeing Sam’s body hanging from the rafters could not escape my head. I desperately wanted Sam to be safe and happy, and as I pulled down the attic door, I could physically feel my nervousness, my fear of what I would find at the top of those stairs. I also experienced that same sense of relief that the students in this study reported as I found that the story of Sam and Lonnie had an apparently happy ending, with them choosing to run away together.

In order to complete the game, players must traverse a couple of secret passages found in the house (the attentive player will learn that the house was originally used during prohibition to smuggle alcohol, which explains all of the hidden compartments and secret passages). In the first secret passage found in Terry and Janice’s closet, the player may notice a wooden crucifix in this area. The passage is quite dark and turning on a pull string light is the only way to reasonably navigate the area. When the player picks up the crucifix and attempts to examine the cross, the light in this passage suddenly bursts. One of the designers of the game, Steve Gaynor, admits in one of the game’s commentary mode audio recordings, that the bulb bursting was one of the few indulgences he made to “mess with the player.” However, that is not entirely true because during the gameplay observation with Jeremy, a ghostly voice can be heard saying “Hey you.” Thankfully Jeremy did not notice it. Steve kindly confirmed to me on Twitter “that was just me

trolling you... I think that sound clip has like a 1/1000 chance to play in place of a creak or bump,” (personal communication, May 6, 2018). The designers intentionally utilize misdirection and an understanding of player expectations as way to ultimately subvert those expectations. Including moments like the bursting light bulb and the random chance of hearing a haunting voice are techniques used to play up the tropes commonly associated with horror games. For Jeremy, he experienced the game always in doubt as to whether some untold horror would ultimately reveal itself.

Even as he played the game with a sense of apprehension when things appeared to get a little spooky, like descending into the dark basement with the creepy furnace, Jeremy never contemplated that suicide might be part of the narrative.

**Shawn:** *So when you went into the bathroom, and you saw kinda the red stains in the bath tub, and you kinda figured that it wasn't blood. Early on it seemed like that at least.*

**Jeremy:** *Yeah, uh from what I gathered from the sister was that like she would, since she was the rebel child she probably would have done something like that. So I was kinda like, oh that looks like blood but where's the hair dye?*

**Shawn:** *Okay. So it never crossed your mind that Sam might be trying to harm herself in some way?*

**Jeremy:** *Nuh, uh. She, {p} from what I got she seemed {p} the only thing was, I guess, she never seemed {p} unstable. Um, she just seemed {p} confused {p} about how she was towards Lonnie. That's the only thing I was able to pick up on because I know that mindset. I know {p} I know what stability sounds like. Not only in tone of voice but in writing. Um, I've hit that rock bottom before so it's like one of those things. Once you've been there, {p} youuuu, you can pick up on it pretty easily. From outside sources.*

As will be covered in future stories that Jeremy shared over the course of our interview, he has had personal experiences with depression and suicidal thoughts, feeling like he had lost



everything. These personal insights allowed for him to view Sam's state of mind from a very different perspective than the other participants.

While *Gone Home* does not directly examine the issue of suicide, the player might simply make inferences as to such, but other narrative games have covered the topic more specifically.

As I talked with Lauren about moments when she personally felt connected with a character while playing a video games, she made reference to the game *Life is Strange*. This games is a teen drama in which the player takes on the role of Max Caulfield, a high school student with an



**Figure 5.9** – Max convinces Kate not to jump in *Life is Strange*

interest in photography who discovers that she has the ability to rewind time and change the course of events. One of Max's friends, Kate, has become the victim of bullying and significant hazing at her school. The player makes choices during the game that will have impact upon various characters. In one particularly powerful scene, Max attempts to stop Kate from jumping off the roof of the school (Figure 5.9).

**Lauren:** *I liked Kate's character a lot. And I really wanted her to not jump off the building. Like a lot. And {p} I liked it whenever after she didn't jump off the building, whenever she and Max were like texting each other and stuff, and like just checking up on each other. I liked that a lot. And it kinda*

*connected with helping out a friend or something.*

**Shawn:** *In your playthrough of *Life is Strange* did Kate jump off the building the first time?*

**Lauren:** *Uh, I think she did, and I was very upset. And I went back and made it not happen.*

**Shawn:** *I'm trying to remember. Did you have to, could you rewind and do it or did you like have to start a new game and redo it?*

**Lauren:** *I think... the mechanic is that you're supposed to rewind and do it, but I had to start a new game because I think I messed it up... too far. And then you had to like keep rewinding a lot. I think it took a lot of rewinding to get her down. But yeah, I really wanted her character to not jump off the building, because it affected... I think I saw in other playthroughs that it like really affected the rest of the campus. And I just didn't want that.*

Lauren's recount of the events that transpire in *Life is Strange* demonstrates how the act of perspective taking could result in her feeling compassion for the character of Kate. She made a connection to the character that resulted in her wanting to do whatever she could to save her. Kate is a digital character after all, not a real person. But in those moments of a good narrative video game, they can seem all too real.

#### *Feeling a Parent's Rejection*



**Figure 5.10** – Behind Terry's bar in *Gone Home*

In *Gone Home*, players discovered a music room with a small bar area that belonged to Terry Greenbriar seen in Figure 5.10. Inside one of the cabinets behind this bar, the players can

find a box that contained a copy of Terry’s book and a letter from his publisher at the time. Due to poor sales of Terry’s two books, the publisher decided to no longer continue their relationship. Keeping this letter behind the bar perhaps serves as an intentional reminder for Terry of his past failure as he drinks.

Participants across playthroughs had a verbal reaction to this discovery. Lauren noted:

*The feeling of rejection for like a book kind of just got to me because there's a huge possibility that I could get that because I want to write a book someday. And I think I just felt what probably the dad would have felt reading that letter.*

In this instance, Lauren was able to demonstrate some level of understanding of how Terry must have felt in that situation and was able to take his perspective. Of note, however, is the way Lauren internalized how Terry must have felt by imagining herself experiencing that rejection given her aspirations to be a writer herself. As before, we have seen examples of participants situating themselves into the experiences and feelings of the virtual characters.



**Figure 5.11** – Terry’s unsold books boxed away in the closet

Mariah also found the letter from Terry’s publisher behind the bar as she exclaimed to herself, “Oh no! Aww. That's sad. Whoa that's in the 70's.” (the letter was written in 1976 telling

Terry that the publisher would not publish any more of his books). Her voice rings with a tone of sympathy for Terry, that she feels bad for him. She made her way over to a closet near the entrance of the music room where she found two boxes of books in the closet. These boxes contained unsold copies of both of Terry's books (see Figure 5.11).

Mariah had a similar reaction to this discovery, again expressing her sympathy, "Aww. He couldn't sell them." Mariah then replaced the box lid to put the failed books out of sight.

**Mariah:** *When I opened the box I thought "oh, no". If he has all of these books in his closet, that means that they're not selling. And it sort of made me think of like {p} a failed dream being shoved away in the back of a closet. And his art and his, his pride and joy being {p} ignored and not appreciated and {p} how that must have hurt him a lot (laugh) having, having this {p} thing that you put SO much effort into because it does take a lot of effort to make a book, especially one that had so much research to go into it. And having to physically put that aside and did not have that accepted, I guess. Um, I did theatre in high school, and I was really active in our theatre department. And, um, that was my passion was, was during theatre and musical theatre and, uh, there was a point where I realized that's not going to happen as a career. And, that sort of reminded me of... I, I made a connection between that feeling and his box of books that he wrote. Realizing that this isn't a career, which is sad that art can't be a career in this day and age. Because everyone wants art but nobody wants to pay for it.*

In Mariah's reflection, she attempts to imagine how Terry must be feeling that his books, that he has poured so much of himself into, did not succeed commercially. In this instance, Mariah attempts to take on Terry's emotions from his perspective, which implies more of an empathetic perspective. She acknowledges the pain and hurt he must be feeling. Mariah places herself in Terry's position as she describes having to physically move what is viewed as a failure and hide it away in the closet. The use of the terms *art*, *pride*, and *joy* draw upon what Mariah believes would be Terry's perspective on his work. She then draws upon her own experiences as a theatre student and made a connection with Terry regarding the shared experience of realizing

that one may not be able to pursue one's true passion as a vocation. This provides encouraging support that empathetic can occur through video games beyond simply feeling sympathy.

Colin too connected with the rejection that Terry must have felt, not just from his book publisher, but also from Terry's own father. In the basement, players may find a copy of Terry's book with a letter from Terry's father congratulating him on the completion of his book (referencing back to Figure 4.1 in the previous chapter). As one reads the letter, you can sense the disapproval from Richard Greenbriar toward his son, Terry. Nearby, players can also find a copy of Richard's book on the *Complete Works of Joyce* as well as a framed portrait of Richard with a plaque noting that he is Professor Laureate of English at the University of Oregon. This establishes that Terry, as a science fiction writer, is living in the shadow of his English professor father to some degree. What is of particular note about this portrait is that the face has either been punched or cut out. Colin took a screen capture of this portrait as something of significance to him while playing the game (Figure 5.12).



**Figure 5.12** – The portrait of Terry's father: Richard Greenbriar

**Colin:** *I took this one because it's very clearly, you just immediately know what the relationship with the father was. Any time you see a picture or a painting where someone has been taken out of it, you can just automatically tell there's a problem there. You know, if that member of the family is very clearly not welcome {p} with this group of the family. He's very clearly had some bad experiences with him, and led them to want to have no form of contact with him. I think {p} this didn't happen until after he got rejected, by the grandfather. I think,*

*you know, Terry probably had a strained relationship {p} with the father growing up. I mean, having, you know, a publisher [sic] for a father and trying to be an author yourself, I can*

*understand that would be a very strenuous relationship. Having your father always critique your work. Having your father always judge you based upon how well he thinks your writing is. And then to have that final rejection, I think that's what drove him or someone in the fam, family to {p} just {p} either cut out or tear out that part of the portrait.*

By interpreting the damaged portrait, Colin makes sense of the father-son relationship. He proposes that perhaps Terry's feeling of rejection from his father may have resulted in Terry intentionally removing the face of his father. One could imagine that Terry, upon receiving the letter from his father, may have taken his anger out on the portrait. The fact that the portrait still sits in the basement after so many years, could suggest that Terry feels some regret and cannot bring himself to actually dispose of the portrait entirely. Colin, returning to his narrative of success, noted, "I mean it doesn't personally connect with me, but, you know, I can relate to someone who's struggling."

As we discussed how Terry must have felt receiving the criticizing letter from his college professor father in response to this first book, Mariah noted, "It's hard to live up to that, I suppose. Especially when your father is like, you tried to do the same thing he did but it didn't work. Like that hurts." I attempted to have Mariah imagine what she would have felt if she received a letter like that from her father. "Hoo! That would really hurt a lot. That woul... ouch. (laugh) I really love my dad. We're close so having him not believe in me would be heart-breaking and oooh, that's hard. (laugh) Don't want to think about that (laugh)." It became clear through her body language and tone that this thought made her uncomfortable. Mariah's moments of laughter came across as nervous laughter. Her tone of voice shifts with hints of sadness as she tried to imagine herself in that position. The fact that Mariah struggled to imagine Terry's experience actually happening to her could imply that the emotional connection was too much for her to contemplate. She acknowledges that that experience would be painful, and it is reasonable that she would not wish to reflect on such a negative experience occurring in her own life.

Colin had a similar reaction trying to imagine receiving a letter like the one Richard sent Terry. He explained that he would be shocked if he ever received a letter like that from his own father. Colin explained:

*Up until this point, I think I've had, between me and my other siblings, the best relationship with the parents. So it would be surprising. There would probably be a bit of betrayal there because I, I've, I'm fairly certain they have supported everything I've done up until this point. This is the path they wanted for me. Like, I've, it would be very surprising {p} to me to receive that letter.*

There are several things that stand out about Colin's assessment. First of all, "up until this point" suggests that something may have happened that, had they known about it, may have disappointed his parents. Secondly, his words suggest that he may be trying to follow what his parents want for him instead of what he wants for himself. During our interview, I challenged Colin to try and imagine that he actually did receive a similar letter from his parents. His reaction was surprisingly dramatic.

*I think I would probably {p} uh, at that point lose contact with the parents. I would probably push away from them a little bit. And, and just try to distance myself. {p} Uh, that's, that's how I've sorta, and I know it's a little unhealthy, but that's kinda how I cope most of the time with things, is I distance myself from it until I'm ready to face that problem. Uh, so I'd probably would {p} I don't know if I would just make some big show and rebel, but I definitely would distance myself from my parents.*

Putting himself in Terry's position, Colin's response seems a bit drastic. Even though he fully admits the unhealthy nature of his reaction, he attempts to normalize it as something that is reasonable. This concept of getting distance from a problem is intriguing and connects to the notion of escapism that some participants associate with the video game medium.

## Engagement in the Gaming Experience

Jenkins (2009) notes that the concept of video games as fun really comes down to a matter of engagement. This concept of engagement in games emerged as a fifth theme. Data analysis of participant interviews and gameplay observations highlighted three aspects of the gaming experience that connected with their engagement in video games in general. These three areas identified are discovery and mystery, interaction and choice, and character relatability.

### *Discovery and Mystery*

One of the biggest criticisms directed towards *Gone Home* is the perceived lack of gameplay. As mentioned in Chapter 2, games like *Gone Home* are commonly referred as “walking simulators” where the games tend to focus more on exploration as opposed to more traditional conceptualization of gameplay such as platforming, combat, or puzzles. In these games, the gameplay is in fact exploration and discovery. *Gone Home* has rudimentary puzzles, but these obstacles are overcome through paying attention to details and exploring the environment to find keys to locked doors or combinations to open other objects in the house such as a filing cabinet. While the game does require the player to open most of these objects in order to progress through the core narrative, some of these locked objects are completely optional and simply provide additional context. The central gameplay of *Gone Home* is the act of exploring and trying to construct an understanding of what happened to the Greenbriar family.

A user of the Polygon website going by the username “rdgalactus” captures the feeling of exploration:

*There’s a moment in the original Myst that I remember vividly. It was in Channelwood, in Sirrus’ study. Turning to walk out of the room, you see a strange sight: Amid the otherwise well-appointed and ornate interior, sit two broken chairs. What happened here? No one ever tells you. That moment stuck with me for its understated mystery, its hinting at a little, forgotten story outside the main narrative. For years, I’ve wanted to*



*play a game that's all about those broken chairs. No action, no puzzles, maybe not even a single line of dialog. Just exploration and a story told through the environment. I think Gone Home is finally that broken-chair game.*

This comparison provides an excellent perspective for understanding the game structure of *Gone Home* and how environmental storytelling involves the player in the process of discovering the story. The game requires the player to explore, interact, and experiment with different ideas in order to reconstruct the story that has been left behind for Kaitlin Greenbriar and the player to discover. It is possible that the player could simply rush through the house and find their way to the attic, but the player would have developed a limited understanding of the love story that unfolds between Sam and Lonnie. But what they would miss are the subtle aspects of the family dynamic and important events in Greenbriar parents' lives as well as implications of the type of person Kaitlin is.

The sense of discovery that emerged as players explored the game environment appealed to many of the participants. Colin noted that the process of discovering the secrets of the house such as the hidden compartments stood out as one of the more memorable moments for him.

This notion of "piecing together the mystery" occurred in every participant interview. Exploration is the gameplay of *Gone Home*. However, the game also requires the player to use their own intellect and deductive reasoning to fully uncover the "mystery" setup by the game. By no means is it required that a player find every journal entry or every contextual clue, but the player will have more clues to play around with as they attempt to reconstruct what took place in the house. One focus group participant noted that a sense of mystery in a video game draws them into the experience, stating, "Like if you have to find all the clues and figure out why this character went missing, or why this character killed another character, or just try to find something to find another person, I love those games." Referring back to the media literacy definition, play represents a person's ability to experiment with his or her environment as a means of problem-solving (Jenkins, 2009). In the context of *Gone Home* and video games like it, this

experimentation within a digital world manifests itself as a form exploring and interacting with the game's environment. Maria captured the essence of this aspect of the game when comparing it to other forms of media.

*Um {?} {p} I think it's, it's interesting to see it in a video game perspective because you're, it's like a mystery. You're putting the pieces together. And I think if it was in a movie aspect, {p} you wouldn't have been as {p} in the middle of it all {?}. Um, so I don't think it would have been as impactful. Especially because in movies, like this story would have been told in maybe like 10 minutes. I wouldn't have taken very long to tell the movie aspect, but in, in a video game you're really at the center of it. And you're figuring it out. It's a puzzle. And I think, putting that much time into it, it's more impactful than "here's the story." (laugh) You're, you're putting the pieces together. And you're figuring it out for yourself. I think that's more impactful.*

From Mariah's stance, the player is directly involved in the story and must work hard to uncover all of the potential story threads within *Gone Home*. So while this sense of discovery is important, it also hints at the importance of players' participation in the experience of playing a video game and uncovering its narrative for themselves.

When I asked one of the focus groups if they felt like a video game had ever taught them something that they could carry with them into the real world, one participant remarked:

*I think the value of exploration because a lot of times there are things that aren't on the direct path in a video game but if you veer off just a little bit, you'll discover something that you wouldn't have known before. And so it's interesting to play through and sort of make those different choices that you find things that you wouldn't have found otherwise.*

### *Interaction and Choice*

The element that differentiates games from other forms of media amongst the college students interviewed during the focus groups and individual interviews is the feature of interaction. For example, during one of the focus groups, a participant noted, "What a game can

do that movies can't is you can explore a world.” During another focus group a participant discussed the importance of player choice in video games using the game *Life is Strange* as an example:

*There's so many different outcomes and so many things can happen to so many different people. And by your choices, it's your fault if someone dies or not. And I think that's kind of important because it teaches you that your choices do matter. And sometimes, it feels like they don't matter in video games, but they do matter in life, and I think that's kind of important to bring in to some video games.*

Making the choices that players make in video games feel like they matter stands out. Students frequently referenced games that have high levels of player interaction and choice as more meaningful experiences. As seen in Chapter 4, many participants in this study reported playing certain video games multiple times making different choices and decisions on these subsequent playthroughs. For some, these multiple playthroughs allowed them to explore alternative pathways of the game's storyline or experiment with new play styles.



**Figure 5.13** – The shrine to Sam and Lonnie

Looking at *Gone Home* specifically, players are given the freedom to explore and there exists the potential for players to experiment within their virtual surroundings to construct meaning from the narrative. For example, there is nothing in the game that prevents a player from finding and collecting objects in the Greenbriar that are significant to the relationship that developed between Sam and Lonnie. While none of the players observed in this study engaged in such practices, other players have done this very thing. Figure 5.13 is a player's constructed shrine to Sam and Lonnie's relationship that was shared online. This act of painstakingly picking up each of these objects and organizing them on the main staircase has no impact on the progression of the game's story, yet players, if so inclined, are able to do it none-the-less. While the game does not ask players to perform such an action, it certainly demonstrates how the flexibility to experiment within the game environment can provide players with opportunities to construct meaning and express their understanding of what they have learned in the context of the gameplay and story. There is also nothing to stop a player from deciding that they will collect every object they can find in the house and throw it in the foyer (Figure 5.14).



**Figure 5.14** – Creating a mess in the Greenbriar foyer

The game even has an achievement/trophy that rewards players for turning on every faucet in the house (amusingly called Wet Bandits). These things have little consequence to understanding the game's story, but they serve as prime examples of the degree of freedom players can have within video games. The ability to experiment in a safe environment and test out ideas shows some of the great promise that video games can provide in learning.

Play as a form of problem solving can also be seen in the ways in which players attempt to overcome in-game challenges. Early in the game while trying to find a way into the locked house, Jeremy attempted to pick up a soda can and throw it at the glass window on the front door. He was able to perform the throwing action, but result did not provide him entrance into the house. The can would only land with a thud. This is a prime example of a creative approach to problem solving that a player may engage in while playing the game. During one of the focus groups a participant explicitly noted that video games have taught him to be a better problem solver. Many participants verbalized their hypotheses regarding where they felt the game's story was heading often reconstructing their understanding as new pieces were uncovered.

When playing narrative-focused games such as *The Wolf Among Us* or *The Walking Dead* (both made by TellTale Games) with strong elements of player choice, players are given the freedom to experiment with their character's identity. Many game series such as *Infamous* and *Mass Effect* have karmic choice systems that will dictate what kind of hero or anti-hero your character will be, while role-playing games like *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* give players the ability to do practically whatever they wish but must live with the consequences of their actions. Players can experiment and see how the world around them will react. If an undesirable outcome results, simply reloading a previous save file will allow them to retry using a new strategy. As was seen when Lauren discussed her experiences playing *Life is Strange*, she felt a connection to not only the character she played as but also to that character's relationships with others. Games like *Life is Strange* that give nuanced choices that are not merely a dichotomy of good versus evil provide players with opportunities to play the game from a view point that

matches their view of the real world. In the case of Lauren, she desperately wanted to save Max's friend Kate from jumping off the building because she had witnessed how severe bullying pushed her to that point.

### *Character Relatability*

Henderson (as cited in Abernathy & Rouse, 2014) found that while players struggled to articulate and retell the stories of the games they have played, there are aspects of the experience that do stand out. Players were able to more effectively recall characters, not necessarily regarding their role in the game's story, but rather in regard to their characterization and personality. That trend also emerged within the context of this study. For instance, when I asked the focus groups what kind of stories they enjoy most in video games, Mariah remarked:

*I really like character-driven games. Kingdom Hearts was thrown around a lot, and I just really like having the emotional connection to the main character. You really wonder what he's going through and where he's coming from, and I find that really interesting.*

From Mariah's perspective, she differentiated character-driven from story-driven game experiences. Also connecting back to the emotional connections that players made while playing *Gone Home* that was covered in Chapter 4, Mariah notes the importance of having that emotional connection to a game's characters in particular, not just a connection to the overall story. This sparked a lively discussion in the group regarding the importance of character development in games that focus in on telling stories.

A member of the focus group, who did not participate in the full study, elaborated, "*I would just have to agree... it's really important to build character development in the games. Because if you can't attach yourself to a character then you're not going to attach yourself to a story.*" In response another member of the group stated that while he does agree, he felt that too much character development could actually occur in games.

This focus group member referenced the character of Samus Aran from the *Metroid* game series. In the original *Metroid*, players took the role of space bounty hunter going on action

focused adventure to stop devious space pirates from weaponizing a parasitic organism. Players did not discover until the end of the game that the power suit wearing bounty hunter was a woman when Samus removed her helmet if you completed the game quickly enough. Even though the game manual referred to Samus using male pronouns, this was setup as means creating surprise for the player back in 1986. [However, it should be noted that even with the empowering nature of having a strong female lead, it is underscored by some concerns with female objectification]. This reveal along with her character development over the years has resulted in Samus Aran become an iconic and endearing character for both male and female players (Tappin, 2017). In the context of this member's perception of Samus, he stated, "*They took a character that had minimal definition but had definition, and had good definition and they try to make a much more robust character out of it, and in doing so stripped away everything that we already liked.*" This statement provides an intriguing perspective into how this player viewed Samus' character development. It would seem that even though Samus originally had broad defining characteristics, he, as the player, has created his own concept of who Samus is. By Nintendo attempting give the character more development, this may not match up with how fans had constructed their understanding of the character over the years.

Looking at back at the stories and experiences that participants shared in Chapter 4 and other moments mentioned during interviews, the importance of relating to a character continues to emerge. Jeremy's relation to Bigby Wolf, Lauren finding that she related to the teen detective of Imagine Detective DS, Mikey relating to the father-daughter that developed between Lee and Clementine in the Walking Dead, Mariah relating to Sora's journey of self-discovery and exploring "who am I?", and Colin relating to Terry Greenbriar struggling to make it as a writer. It is these human experiences with which the player connects. Players appear to be invested in the experience if they care and can relate to the experiences of the game characters whether it be the character they directly control or the non-player characters they will experience through the game's narrative. From the perspective of the situated learning matrix within video games, the

non-player characters such Terry, Clementine, and others can act as a tool for the player that will ultimately mediated the relationship between identity and constructing meaning with the content of the game (Gee, 2008b).

### **Playing the Role**

Based upon how participants approach their playing of *Gone Home* in comparison to how they perceived they would have behaved in reality, there appears to be a performative element taking place while playing a video game. Playing the game in a specific role is the study's final emergent theme. Mariah highlights this well when she explained:

*I think when I'm playing a character that's not me in a video game, I'm still very, like what am I going to do? And not what are they going to do. Because usually when I'm acting, I'm, I'm playing a part of myself but I'm still thinking about their motivations and their aspirations and what they're going through in the scene and not what am I going through in the scene? What's happening to me? So. I think in video games I'm much more {p} myself. When I'm playing a character in like a video game, I'm definitely like, "this is me." (laugh) I'm playing me. Because I wanna, I {p} I wanna live out the adventures of the character's living out.*

Alternatively, some players will take on a strong roleplaying approach to the games they play. For example, during one of the focus groups, one of the participants remarked:

*A lot of times on my first playthroughs, I'll make a character that's just me, and I'll pick whatever sounds the coolest. And then I'll go through a normal playthrough of the game and get either mostly or all the way through it. And then I will go back and I'll make a second character, and I'll start actually roleplaying.*

Taking a multiple playthrough approach to video games, as noted and explored in Chapter 4, allows players to experiment with the type of role they adopt within the game. *Gone Home*, on the other hand, does not feature strong roleplaying elements. However, that did not stop



participants from trying to embrace the role of Kaitlyn Greenbriar while also projecting their experiences and thoughts to build out their conceptualization of who Kaitlyn was.

This comparison of playing a game as a form of acting also came up in one of the focus groups as well. The performative role of the player can be seen through the direct simile that a focus group member used, stating, “A game is like acting... There's a goal that you as an actor or you as a player have and must accomplish. And you have input or a choice of tactics that you can employ to reach that goal.”

Colin reported that he felt like he was able to fully embody and roleplay as Kaitlin while playing the game. Jenkins (2009) notes that the act of roleplaying can be understood as one means in which a person may test different identities and explore various social spaces. Colin discussed his interest in roleplaying not just in video games but also in tabletop games.

*Games like Gone Home, I could very much, you know, get into the character. And get into it, And I do Dungeon and Dragons with friends sometimes and I very much get into the characters. Because that's what that's about, you know. It's getting into the character and performing this just, chain of events in character. But then there's also {p} games where it, it's so much more fun to just go around as yourself in it. Um, like Skyrim. Uh, the first character I made, it was definitely, “okay, I'm going to be this character in Skyrim.” I'm going to maximize my efforts in this game to be this person, and then a second run through where I just went around and did only the things I wanted to do. A character that was just, “oh, I'm going to dabble in magic, I'm going to dabble in this” because I think it's cool. I think it would be fun to go through the College of Winterhold and just become the Archmage. {p} But most of the time, if it's a game where it's VERY story driven, I will try and stick to the character... I did a lot of theatre {p} back home. And {p} being a character in Dungeons and Dragons is very much like performing on stage. I mean you have this, you have this character that you have to become. That you have to, you have completely leave yourself behind to become this completely different*

*person that would never do or be anything like you. And you have this {p} certain set of dialogue that you have to stay within with that character. Where as in, with a performance in a play you have this strict line-by-line narrative.*

What differs between the roleplaying games that Colin describes, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) and *The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim*, and a game like *Gone Home* is the amount of player-driven decisions.

While *D&D* and *Skyrim* as games allow the player to make decisions about what kind of person they will be in the game, such as their personality, skills, and weaknesses, *Gone Home* establishes the type of character that Kaitlin is supposed to be and ways in which she differs from her sister. The game provides the player with bits of Kaitlin's thoughts and insights, and as many participants noted, these moments can be reminders that the player is in fact taking on the role of Kaitlin. While a player may want to leave the Greenbriar house, the game does not allow for that. It is quite common that games will impose limitations upon the player, but *Gone Home* does limit the amount of autonomy that player has to change up who Kaitlin is in the game. For example, if a player decides that Kaitlin is suddenly inspired by the rebellious tendencies of her sister Sam, the player does not have many options to role-play Kaitlin in that way (beyond trashing the house by throwing everything not nailed down on the ground or simply deciding that Kaitlin isn't going to look for her family). The game defines who the character of Kaitlin to the player in subtle ways. The first thing the player learns about Kaitlin is that she is in college and is returning from a study abroad trip in Europe. Even in the very first room of the house, players can find trophies of some of Kaitlin's achievements, while there are no awards on display for her sister. The game establishes the role that the player is intended to perform, and in every observation conducted in this study, participants accepted that role even though they acknowledged that they would have approached the situation Kaitlin found herself in very differently.

Colin did acknowledge that it very difficult to completely separate himself from the characters that he plays within a game as it would be impossible to truly become Kaitlin. While

aspects of Kaitlin's identity and personality are established while playing the game, players will still fill in the gaps often with their own perspectives or mood at the time. This can be seen when I asked Jeremy, "What kind of identity do you want your characters to have?"

*Um, {p} but depending on how I'm feeling at the time, {p} like even by the end of the game if I still don't feel that way at the beginning, I'll still stick with it. Because that's how I'll, how I've done it, if like oh, I want to be, I want to be absolutely brutal... There's some games like [Skyrim] oh yeah, I want to be this really nice guy, try to do everything I can and all this stuff. And these other times I'm playing the game and I start off like, first, after I get out of the prologue, first 15 minutes I walk past a villager stop and go {p} (pounds on table) "they're going to die." And just walk over and massacre. And I'll, even if I don't feel that way the next time I go and play the game, {p} it's too bad. I've stuck with it. That's that character now.*

Jeremy's response illustrates how his mental or emotional state can influence how he approaches a game. Even though Jeremy could easily reload a previous game to undo his village massacre, he elects to live with the consequences of those actions when plays again. The role he takes within the game will adapt depending upon the type of role he wants to perform the next time he plays. His description of how he approaches the characters he plays also demonstrates his awareness while there will be consequences in the game, it is still just a game.

*"It's just a video game"*

Awareness that the participants were playing a video game did appear to be prominent throughout the gameplay observations. Some participants would treat objects with a sense of disregard in way that would be atypical in a real world setting. For example, when picking up an object in the house such as a cup, many players would throw the item on the floor instead of putting it back where it originated. Mariah is one of the exceptions. As was discussed in the way in which Mariah projected herself into the character of Kaitlin, she was meticulous in her efforts to make sure items ended where she found them in order to keep the house in a "tidy" manner.

However, even Mariah hit a point where the controls were not cooperating for her and she ended up dropping an object on the floor. When she did this, Mariah stated, “I’m going to leave it there. This is a video game.” She recognized that she was performing a role within the context of the video game and that not putting things back in their virtual place was not something that was necessary for her to progress.

Jeremy exhibited apprehension and periods of dread throughout this gameplay observation due to this believe that he was playing a horror game. When he encountered a Ouija board, he commented to himself that people should not mess with such things. However, he still interacted with it in the role of Kaitlin. I asked him why he picked up the Ouija board even though he personally had strong feelings to avoid such a thing in the real world. Jeremy responded:

*Nope, that was one of those moments where I withdraw and this is a game though. There might be something attached to this, there might be a note on the back or something. You know in this game (laugh) from what I've done so far. So I like flipped it around and looked all over, and nope, there's nothing. Great, now get back in there.*

Jeremy was willing to step outside of himself and inspected the Ouija board even though he recognized it was unlikely he would have done so given his reservations about interacting with an object he associates with evil. He was performing the role of Sam’s sister that desperately sought clues to explain why her family was missing.

Reflecting upon what he would have done if the events of Gone Home had actually happened to him, Mikey believed he would have behaved different in the real world than he did while playing the game. Mikey explained:

*Well, I probably wouldn't have gone around snooping through all the stuff trying to put things together. Uh, I mostly would have been really concerned about where my sister was if she left a note on the door saying she can't be here. So, I would be worried about her and be trying to call my parents, but I wouldn't, but I guess she didn't know where*

*they were... personally I'd probably have gone and laid down or something. Sounded like she'd [Kaitlin Greenbriar] been on a long flight. So I probably would have gone, laid down, went to sleep, not gone looking around look for things... I'm kinda not a nosey person.*

Yet Mikey did perform the role of nosey sibling in the game. He rifled through belongs, read private notes, and uncovered pieces of the Greenbriar family's life. Why would he do this in *Gone Home* but not in his own life? As he put it, "it's just a video game." Colin had a very similar perspective to Mikey. Colin reflected:

*I don't know if I would have explored the house, so much. I don't know. I think I would have {p} continued to try and contact someone in the family {?} instead of searching it through clues and pieces of paper and notes. I think it would have been maybe easier {p} to try and wait out the storm and then to contact family. Then to try and {p} piece things together.*

In spite of the players' perception of how they would have acted if they were truly in the situation of Kaitlin Greenbriar, participants ultimately played the game. There is an expectation that they will perform the role set for them within the game because, after all, lying on the couch until your family returns home does not make for a compelling game experience. Playing the game is a performance.

### *Escapism*

The idea of videos games a form of escapism emerged first during one of the focus groups. One of the participants explained, "*Definitely, obviously, the escapism, the catharsis of being able to do things you either normally couldn't or normally wouldn't do in real life. But I like to see the emotions a game can evoke in me.*" Video games not only allow players to take on new roles, but also provides a temporary escape from the roles of a person's everyday world. Additionally, video games may provide players with a great sense of control of their actions in comparison to the real world. A member of a focus group remarked:

*I feel like when I'm playing that game I'm in control of the situation. I don't plan on doing the things I do in a video games in real life, but I'm like, "Hey, I feel like I'm actually having an adventure in the video game, where in real life, it's my life.*

This statement reinforces the firm separation between what a person would do in *real life* versus within the confines of video game. Escaping into another life filled with adventure and excitement provides this member of the focus group with an opportunity to something more adventurous that he would less likely to do in reality. Embracing that video game role or identity is part of that experience. Video games provide a lower stakes experiences where bad decisions can typically be overcome by starting over or trying a new approach, where as in reality, choices often have permanent consequences that cannot be undone.

When I asked Mikey why he plays video games, the primary reason is because he can do things that he cannot do in real life such as catching a Pokémon or being Spider-Man. Games allow him the opportunity to step outside of himself to have those experiences, and he feels like he is doing the actions within the game himself. Mikey commented, “It's not just a video game. It's a way of life in a way. And so I can do these things that I can't do in real life and be better.” This idea of video games making us “be better” is of particular interest in his statement. Not only can video games teach us new things that could help us to be better in our actual lives, they can also provide players with an opportunity to be better by getting away into another world. Mikey elaborated further on one of the core reasons he plays video games:

*Probably because video games have got me through {p} tough times. Like, {p} I have never had like, I, I grew up in a bad neighborhood as a kid, but I've never had like really super hard times. Like I didn't live on the street or anything. My parents always had a home. But video games have always been there as, oh my parents are arguing. I can go to my room. I'm going to play video games. I can sit down in (p) I can remove myself from this world and put myself into the world of a video game. So I don't have to deal with*

*those surroundings. Like I zone out when I play video games. I don't focus on the world around me unless my phone or something rings.*

As was seen in Lauren's identity story, video games can provide opportunities to explore new and unfamiliar situations in safe scenarios. Similarly, Colin's identity story made frequent references to the notion that video games give him an opportunity to "break free" from the rules of the everyday world, and Jeremy utilized video games as a means of helping his friend get his mind off his family problems at home. Video games are more than just a distraction for these players because they still bring their experiences, ideals, and identities with them into these narrative video games. The ability to step away temporarily from our own lives can provide some cathartic benefits for players.

During our interview, Mariah noted that she has been playing a lot of an online game called ToonTown (this is a revived version of a Disney online game that officially closed in 2013 but can now be played without the affiliation with Disney). Mariah claimed that she had been spending far too much time playing that game lately. When I asked her why she has been playing a game that she called

"It's just dumb, sheer stupid fun. And you don't have a lot of control in the game. You really don't. But (laugh) but it's easy, and I don't die a lot (laugh). And if I die it's not my fault (laugh)."

This use of games as an escape or diversion is not something that is unique to narrative-focused games, as can be seen with the ToonTown game, but video games can provide players with the ability to tackle new but voluntary challenges in situations where they may feel that they have a greater sense of control and lower-stakes consequences.

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the themes that emerged across datasets through narrative analysis and thematic coding. The six themes were examined in relation to data: 1) Coming Out and Seeking Acceptance, 2) The Value of Friendship, 3) Adjusting to Change, 4) Emotionally Connecting to a Virtual Person, 5) Engagement in the Gaming Experience, and 6) Playing the

Role. Subthemes were also explored when appropriate for each of these core themes. The final chapter will continue to analyze the data and will draw conclusions from the findings. The established research questions will be examined and the findings from this study will be applied to draw an understanding of the any answers that developed over the analysis process. Additionally, implications for education and future research will be explored regarding the use of video games as educational tools for learning.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Review of Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how college students construct meaning from interactive video game narratives regarding how they situate virtual experiences, how they perceive identities of themselves and others, and how they may or may not take on the perspectives of others. From an educational perspective, this study also intended to determine ways in which the new media literacy concepts of play, performance, simulation, and negotiation may apply while playing narrative-focused video games, especially in regard to understanding different perspectives and exploring issues of social justice.

Students with an interest in video games at a Midwestern, state university were invited to participate in one of three focus groups in order to collect general information regarding college student perspectives on video games as a means of storytelling. Additionally, these focus groups were used to ultimately select students who would participate in the final two stages of the study. The five college students were selected using purposeful sampling because narrative analysis depends upon rich, detailed stories from participants. Students were selected based upon the ability to effectively share their thoughts and opinions in detail. These five students participated in a gameplay observation of the game *Gone Home* followed by an individual interview. Participants were also invited to optionally participate in member checks to ensure that my transcription and interpretations were accurately detailed. Transcribed focus groups, observations,

and interviews underwent thematic coding processes to identify core themes in the data. The theoretical perspective utilized in this study stemmed from the foundation of constructivism with the theoretical framework utilizing situated learning theory and Gee's theories of identity (both broadly and in video game contexts). Situated learning theory proposes that learning is "situated" in the cultural and contextual features of the environment in which the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, as Gee (2007, 2011) proposes, players will depend upon three interrelating yet unique real, virtual, and projective identities when playing a video game. This projective identity in particular connects with ways in which players may situate their experiences within a video game. Situated learning involves connecting previous knowledge and experiences with learning that occurs in informal and typically unintentional contexts. Context matters with situated learning when learning specific content. The content of the learning process occurs through active involvement in realistic and complex problem solving. Video games in particular provide an excellent example of situated learning in the way that the player will learn the nuances of how to play the game through the process of playing. Gee's (2008b) situated learning matrix attempts to apply the concepts of situated learning theory to learning that occurs within video games. This learning is specific to the particular contexts of the video game, but this study intended to explore whether learning may occur within the game that could have relevance to the world outside of the video game environment. Active participation along with discussion and reflection are key aspects of the learning process from the perspective of situated learning.

A total of six themes emerged from the datasets: 1) Coming Out and Seeking Acceptance, 2) The Value of Friendship, 3) Adjusting to Change, 4) Emotionally Connecting to a Virtual Person, 5) Engagement in the Gaming Experience, and 6) Playing the Role. The first three themes represent themes that emerged regarding the connections that participants made between their video games experiences and their lived experiences. The second three themes examined ways that participants approached their video game experiences and the meaning they derived.

With an interest in stories and identity, the following research questions were explored in this study.

### **Question 1: Situating Ourselves in the Interactive Narrative**

*RQ1: How do college students situate their own lived experiences, stories, and identity within narrative-focused video game narratives?*

By attempting to better understand how college students situate their own lived experiences, stories, and identity within narrative-focused video game narratives, moments where students discussed their personal experiences in the context of the game were identified.

Examining how students situate their own perspectives could provide insight into how learning may unintentionally be occurring through narrative video games that tackle serious and relatable aspects of human existence. All participants in this study actively situated the events of the game into their own experiences. To put it in the terms of Piaget (1954, 1962), they assimilated the experiences within the video game to fit within the context of their lived experiences. Throughout the gameplay observations and during the individual interviews, students were attempting to make sense of the virtual world through their real world experiences. Exploring specific case moments provides the best insight into how situated learning theory applies. Moments where students shared stories relating their own experiences to the experiences of characters in the game *Gone Home* as well as other games they have personally played, and thematic analysis was conducted on those shared stories and structural analysis occurred when appropriate. While some themes emerged across participants, some topics were unique to particular participants based upon their specific experiences.

As seen through the stories shared by participants in Chapter 4, all participants utilized their own specific experiences and worldview as a frame in which to understand and create meaning from their experiences within the game. Taken in the context of Gee's Situated Learning Matrix, there is a lot that can be learned regarding how players situated both their lived and virtual experiences. Using *Gone Home* as an example, the game does not provide the player with

a great deal of information upfront. The game occurs in a realistic setting and establishes the goal within the game quickly by planting the seeds of a mystery that must be solved. However, in the absence of clear norms for the player to follow, players ultimately draw upon their own norms and expectations to build out their virtual identity within the game. The game does not tell the players how they should act in the game (although it does establish some restrictions such as not being able to go outside the house or the ability to break down locked doors or windows), the player is ultimately in charge of where to go and what to explore. With the game requiring an attention for detail to fully uncover all of the potential story threads, this is a skill can represent part of the content that a player may learn through the act of playing the game. Gee (2008b) notes that the technologies and tools that mediate the connection between content and identity do not necessarily have to exist within the game. For example, players may collaborate with peers outside of the game or online guides to discuss strategies and tips. Because these tools are not bound to the game itself, I am arguing that previous experiences that players bring with them into the game may serve as a toolset that aids in the construction of meaning in the game. As players utilize a projective stance towards their in-game identity, projecting aspects of themselves into the character, lived experiences and their sense of personal identity become even more important.

While this research question intended to understand how students situate their lived experiences within video game narratives, what emerged was actually the opposite. Instead, players are situating the video game narratives within their lived experiences. In other words, participants in this study appear to consistently attempt to assimilate the experiences within the game with their own stories and reflections. The hope was to find some evidence that students may attempt to accommodate new virtual experiences into their schema, but the current research instead validates Piaget's (1962) notion that play will result in assimilated learning. As will be seen as this study's second research question is explored in the next section, significant moments of perspective taking occurred for several participants. While perspective taking alone is not sufficient to suggest students have begun to accommodate those virtual experiences into their

understanding of the world, it does provide a promising look at the potential video game narratives may have in learning.

Each participant drew upon their own experiences as they interpreted the events that occurred in *Gone Home* as well as in other narrative-focused video games they have played. Jeremy's connection to Bigby Wolf in *The Wolf Among Us* is the one exception where it is not entirely clear how much of the video game narrative has been situated into this own experiences and sense of identity. There is not enough evidence present to suggest that Jeremy accommodated his own schemas to understand the experiences of Bigby Wolf. It is possible that his own personal experiences and feelings were already similar to the broad level experiences of Bigby Wolf that his own personal narrative began to incorporate aspects of the video game narrative.

One particularly promising finding was the notion that even our virtual experiences may help us to understand and construct meaning when playing other virtual experiences like video games. This finding suggests that virtual experiences can help us to understand other experiences regardless if they are real or virtual. Therefore, utilizing video games could potentially serve as a legitimate form of media for educating students about cultures and perspectives that are different from their own. If students are pulling from their experiences to construct meanings of new experiences, meaningful virtual experiences may help students to better understand real-world problems and situations as a result.

The current study did provide preliminary evidence in support that situated learning can occur through the use of video games. Not only were participants learning how the game worked as they progressed, they also learned about socially relevant content that connects to the real world. *Gone Home* also reinforces player awareness and an attention to detail by rewarding the player with new content that builds out the narrative; however other games such as *The Witness*, a puzzle exploration game, utilizes player awareness to an even greater extent as a skill that will be developed over the course of the game. Throughout their gameplay of *Gone Home*, participants frequently relied upon their own lived experiences as a means of interpreting the events that

occurred in the game. Through the stories that participants shared regarding other narrative-focused video games they have played, it supports the idea that situated learning may generalize to other video game experiences.

However, the question that emerges from this finding is how can the accommodation of new and meaningful experiences from video games be facilitated? Instead of upholding the status quo of our current beliefs through assimilation, accommodation could result in meaningful changes in perspective and understanding of the world. Piaget proposes that accommodation may result when disequilibrium occurs after encountering new situations as a means of achieving balance. As Isbister (2016) has argued, the act of willingly engaging in alternative viewpoints in video games, whether it be different situations or experiences from our own, could ultimately influence our own understanding of what it means to be human. This suggests that if accommodation of new experiences encountered in video games is to occur, it must be an intentional practice where existing cognitions are challenged. Facilitating this accommodation process may be accomplished in part by engaging in community discussions that can bring attention and focus to these alternative perspectives. This is where utilizing video games within classroom contexts may be of value. These educational situations could provide opportunities for individuals to willfully engage with these alternative perspectives that exist within many narrative-focused video games. Wispé (1986) conceptualizes empathy as an effortful process that can lead to an enhanced understanding of others' experiences. In much the same way, accommodating virtual experiences into our schema will be a purposeful process. Furthermore, creating situations that challenge players to experience the world from a perspective markedly different from their own may hold the most promise.

As has been established, we situate ourselves within these characters by bringing our lived experiences along with us. We see the world from the perspective of these virtual characters and learn in those situated moments by connecting those virtual experiences with our own lived experiences and sense of identity. We learn from experiences that are simultaneously our own

and not our own in these virtual environments. Yet, in those moments when the character we embody deviates from our own experiences and identity, a space arises in which true understanding of different perspectives may begin to flourish. This connects with the concept of cognitive dissonance, in which a person experiences discomfort due to two conflicting cognitions (Festinger, 1962). This dissonance tends to be strongest when these cognitions involve a person's identity specifically. This has important implications for education, which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, intentionally creating these moments of cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium may be the element that could lead to accommodation through the act of play.

### **Question 2: Understanding Diverse Perspectives through a Virtual Lens**

*RQ2: How does playing narrative-focused video games contribute towards a student's understanding others through perspective taking?*

Video games have the potential to expose players to a multitude of perspectives that may differ from their own as well as perspectives that may serve as reflections of their own attitudes, values, and ideals. Therefore, this study attempted to explore how playing narrative-focused video games may contribute towards a student's understanding of others through perspective taking. As was seen with the first research question, research participants had the tendency to situate their in-game experiences within the context of their own lived experiences. One trend that emerged that may have had an impact on how well the participants were able to understand the characters in *Gone Home* came down to what details players devoted attention towards and which details they chose to ignore.

The game utilized in this study, *Gone Home*, relies heavily on environmental storytelling as one way to deliver its narrative. According to Smith and Worch (2010), environmental storytelling within video games can communicate a variety of information to the player. Of particular relevance to the current study, environmental story telling can reinforce the identity of the player and can provide narrative context in the game. Environmental storytelling depends upon the player to form associations and connections to unique elements in the environment

(Smith & Worch, 2010). In turn, environmental storytelling encourages players to form interpretations of situations and meaning based upon the players' experiences and viewpoints in the game. The main story of the game focuses on the relationship between Sam and Lonnie that evolved from a friendship into a romantic relationship during the 1990's. It also addresses the difficulty that Sam's parents had facing the reality that their daughter was gay and the overall denial of the problem that eventually led to Sam and Lonnie running away together.

With the goal of developing a better understanding of how playing narrative-focused video games may contribute towards a student's understanding of others through perspective taking, this study has shared both significant connections as well as obstacles that potentially obscured the ability to fully take on the perspectives of others. As demonstrated through the stories that participants shared during their interviews, participants were connecting their own experiences to make sense of in-game scenarios. As a result, evidence suggests that players were able to make some form of empathetic connection to the struggles of the characters in the game to varying degrees.

Just as players utilized their own lived experiences to understand the contexts and content of video game narratives, players also bring along their unique assumptions, biases, and prejudices. While all of the participants in this study absolutely exhibited tendencies to empathize and the willingness to view situations through alternative perspectives, obstacles did present themselves. Primarily, players made judgements regarding what items in the game carried meaning and significance to the game's goals of exploration and discovery, which in turn led players to inadvertently overlook important insights into the characters of *Gone Home* and its overall narrative.

As noted previously, players commonly situate the video game experiences within the context of their own experiences, whether it be how Mariah framed the teen "angst" of Sam in *Gone Home* with her own attitudes as a teenager or how Jeremy drew direct parallels between himself and the character Bigby Wolf. When attempting to understand the perspectives of others,



these lived experience appear to play a significant role in how a player connects to the virtual characters. Finding commonalities between character experiences and their own experiences appears to correspond with an emotional connection occurring. The question remains whether players may simply be experiencing a sympathetic versus an empathetic response. While empathy connects more closely with perspective taking, some participants believed it may be a struggle to fully take another's perspective without having experienced the event themselves in reality. Empathy can generally involve more of an effortful process in order to cognitively or emotionally connect with the situation of another (Wispé, 1986). On the other hand, some participants seemed capable of truly imagining themselves in the virtual scenarios and having the insight to discuss how they might feel or react. Participants in this study did exhibit legitimate concern and care for many of the characters they encountered in *Gone Home* as well as other video games. At times, participants' reactions reflected a more sympathetic stance and at other times more empathetically when the player attempts to view the situation from a particular character's perspective.

As participants discussed emotional events that occurred within video games, such as Terry Greenbriar receiving a hurtful letter from his father or having to bury a brother after sharing a long journey together, sometimes these events appeared to bring the player too close to the experience than was comfortable. Mariah described playing some video games as being inside the story that allows for a lot of immersion. While participants were willing to discuss emotional moments from video games, when they were asked to imagine that event actually happening to them, many participants found this extremely challenging and exhibited sharp reactions. Situating these experiences as occurring in virtual environments may make these emotional experiences more palpable to explore for participants. When these moments are moved to the real world, perhaps these moments become too real. In general, participants demonstrated legitimate concern for non-player characters as they reflected upon their experiences in *Gone Home* and other narrative-focused video games. Though participants' words and tone most often reflected having pity for characters and feeling bad for them, there were distinct moments when participants were

able to perspective take and demonstrated a greater understanding of what the character must be experiencing.

While the interactive nature of video games was reported for many participants as being an important aspect for helping them connect to others through video games, the interactivity alone did not appear in itself to create an emotional response for participants. Engagement emotionally in a video game appeared to be associated, at least in part, with characters that the players felt they could relate to or feel connected with on some level. However, moments where the player may experience some sort of disconnect from their character may have some of the greatest opportunities for growth and perspective taking. For example, Lauren explained:

*I think it's good to play games, watch movies, or read books with like characters that you don't connect with. But I also think, it's really nice after you've like read a bunch of things that you don't connect with that you finally do connect with. And I think they both matter a lot in terms of character growth.*

As she gained more experience with these characters and began to appreciate their differences, Lauren perceived character growth. Yet this character growth could reasonably be attributed to both the character in the story as well as to the person experiencing the story as the reader/player. This also echoes back to Mariah's identity story where she did not feel she could relate to her role in the play at all, but once she was immersed in the experience, she fell in love with the part. Her conclusion reflecting upon it now: "I grew from it."

### **Question 3: Identity Stories of the Virtual, Real, and Projective Self**

*RQ3: How does playing narrative-focused video games inform a student's concept of personal identity in comparison to their adopted in-game identity?*

Using Gee's (2000) theory of identity as a starting place helps to conceptualize how participants' virtual identity within the game informs their personal identity. For understanding identities within the context of video games, Gee (2007) also writes of virtual, real, and projective identities. Projective identities (also sometimes referred to as hybrid identities) represent the

projection of a player's perspectives and values upon a virtual character as well as the player's viewing the development of characters as a project of what the player hopes the character will become through gameplay. Using Gee's concept of Natural, Institutional, Discourse, and Affinity Identities within the context of these virtual and projective identities in video games provided a core theoretical framework for this research.

The students who participated in this study rarely discussed facets of their Nature identity (N-Identity) which represents a state developed through forces in nature; a characteristic that a person has no control over such as biological sex. Each participant did reference their Institutional identity (I-Identity) of being both a student and a sibling in passing but this type of identity did not emerge when students were more directly asked how they would describe themselves. As Gee (2000) notes, aspects of our identity are not necessarily mutually exclusive of each other. In the case of the sibling identity, one could argue that this could be a N-identity because siblings may be biologically related. However, when taking the sibling identity as something that emerges from the institution of family, it allows for the social construction of siblings to emerge even in cases of adopted siblings. An Institutional Identity (I-Identity) represents an identity that has been authorized by authorities within institutions. As might reasonably be expected, participants identify themselves as college students indirectly during their interviews, making references to being a college student while not directly identifying as a college student when asked to describe their identity. Affinity identity (A-Identity) represents experiences shared in practice of affinity groups, groups based on unifying interests. Only one of the five participants described himself as a "gamer" during interviews and observations, but other forms of A-Identities were discussed in passing such as being a writer or an actress.

By far, Discourse identity (D-Identity) exists as the most common identity type that participants utilized when asked to describe their own identities. D-Identity serves as an individual trait recognized in the discourse with rational individuals. It is through the interaction with others that brings out and reinforces a particular identity trait. Terms such as *happy*,

*sheltered, creative, adventurous,* and “*The Beast*” are just a few examples of discursively created identifiers that participants used to describe themselves. However, all five participants in this study exhibited some difficulty in their ability to articulate what makes them “who they are.” In order better understand why this might be the case, looking at other theories of identity is needed.

Erikson (1963, 1968) wrote extensively about the psychosocial stages of development as well as the importance of identity. Erikson viewed development as occurring in eight distinct stages in which the individual encounters a psychosocial crisis with a potentially positive or negative outcome. The fifth stage of identity vs role confusion was theorized to occur between 12 and 18 years of age. This identity vs role confusion stage involved a time in which adolescents explore potential values, beliefs, and sense of identity. According to Erikson’s theory, college students would hypothetically have established their sense of identity by this point in their lives. Unsuccessfully resolving this conflict of discovering one’s self would result in role confusion in which a person struggles to firmly conceptualize their identity and their place in society. However, other researchers have taken the principles of Erikson’s perspective on development and applied it directly to college age students.

From a student development perspective, Chickering’s (1969, 1993) Theory of Identity Development may provide additional insights into why the college students who participated in this study may be struggling to articulate their concept of self-identity. Chickering’s theory outlines seven vectors of identity development that is relevant for traditionally college-age individuals. The concept of vectors versus concrete stages designates that these vectors do not necessarily occur in a sequential manner. These vectors include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Vector five of Chickering’s theory is Establishing Identity which is of particular importance in the context of the current study.

While Chickering's theory helps to better understand college student identity formation and exploration, a more contemporary theory helps to provide more insight into why the students in this study may be struggling to pinpoint and articulate their sense of identity. Arnett (2000) theorized that the stage he called Emerging Adulthood may be occurring between the ages of 18 and 25. Arnett argues that societal changes have resulted in a delay in adulthood as more people put off marriage and having children and instead focus on advancing their careers. Arnett argues that this period features a great deal of exploration and change, which potentially explains the uncertainty that many participants exhibited when attempting to describe their self-identity. The theory of emerging adulthood has direct implications for identity exploration as well.

Gee's (2000) theory of identity helps to understand further how participants discussed the concept of identity for themselves and the characters they play as. While some implicit references to Institutional Identity and Affinity Identity did appear, Discourse Identity emerged as the type of identities that the participants explicitly referenced in their stories by focusing on specific personal traits. It is through social interaction that Discourse-Identities develop and therefore the interaction with others reinforces these types of identities.

Video games provide players with the opportunity to view the world from a perspective that is different from their own, but they also provide players with opportunities to experiment with new identities and experiences. One of the conclusions drawn from student accounts of their experiences playing video games is that they are not dedicated to one particular identity. In some case, players are simultaneously drawing upon their real identity and in-game identity. There does appear to be a hybrid identity occurring in which players project themselves into the character they embody. They play the game as themselves at moments and then from the perspective of Kaitlin Greenbriar during others. That is not to say that real, virtual, and projective identities are mutually exclusive.

As seen throughout this study, moments when the player can draw upon personal experiences are also moments when they feel the most connected to the character they embody in

the game. This may be something unique to this particular type of video game given that other forms of video games provide players with more control over the creation of the character or the choices that they make. In a game like *Gone Home*, the characters have already been established by the game designers. The only control players have over Kaitlin is where she will move, where she will look, and what she will pick up. Therefore, players must interpret what they encounter in the game on their own. Kaitlin will provide her occasional insights through brief mouse over text to provide the player with additional context. With *Gone Home*, players can never truly be themselves or truly be Kaitlin Greenbriar. A hybrid of identities exists in which players project themselves into the characters they play. Just as we each possess multiple identities in reality, this becomes even more complex within a video game environment in which players bring their personal identities with them while also adopting the identity of the characters they play as. Instances in which players project their own values into these characters provides an interesting dynamic for exploring how learning may take place.

#### **Question 4: Applying the Media Literacy Lens**

*RQ4: How do student experiences with video game narratives relate to the media literacies of play, performance, simulation, and negotiation?*

Video games represent a unique form of media that has potential to combine story and play, where players can become active participants. Whether it be attempting to capture an objective from an enemy team or uncover the clues necessary to solve a mystery, video games introduce an element of interaction that many other forms of media cannot match. Understanding the role in which narrative-focused video games can serve in education and their media literacy implications are greatly needed as the field has grown over the last several decades. While the previous research questions were examined using the theoretical framework of situated learning theory and Gee's identity theory, this final research question needs to be examined more thoroughly from a media literacy perspective. Utilizing aspects of Henry Jenkins' (2009) conceptualization of new media literacies, this study attempted to understand how experiences

with video game narratives relate to the media literacies of play, performance, simulation, and negotiation. Jenkins notes that these new media literacies should be considered as essential social skills that focus on engaging with larger community in twenty-first century society.

Examining these media literacy concepts in relation to player experiences playing video games provided some encouraging insights into how college students may engage with interactive narrative. By far the strongest connections found related to the concepts of play and performance. Through the process of playing *Gone Home* and games like it, players are given opportunities to utilize their deductive/inductive reasoning, critical thinking, and problem solving skills. Players can experiment with their virtual surroundings in order to solve the problem presented in the game, solving the mystery of what happened to the Greenbriar family in the case of *Gone Home*. Players are also given an opportunity to take on the role of someone other than themselves through performance. Through this act of performing a role within games, players can attempt to better understand the events transpiring within the game relying both upon their own lived experiences as well as the bits of information that Kaitlin herself can provide the player through on-screen thoughts and comments that she makes. The ability to perspective take and develop understanding of others seems to be a core benefit that can be achieved through taking a performative stance within a game.

Surprisingly, the media literacy concepts of simulation and negotiation were less prominently demonstrated through the data collected but some evidence still emerged. While *Gone Home* attempts to simulate a real family home environment occurring in 1995, players did not appear to frame their experiences and meaning making in the context of the time period the game attempts to simulate. Participants in this study appeared to focus more upon the simulated dynamics of being a teenager and the parent-child dynamic, drawing from their own experiences at the same time. *Gone Home* refers to itself as a simulation, but participants did not appear to connect as much with this element of the game. The use of *Gone Home* in this study had intended to provide opportunities for participants to understand and respect different perspectives. While

participants did build an understanding of the game's characters (to varying degrees), when they reflected on past gaming experiences, the act of gaming with others had the biggest emotional impact upon them. Players reported using games as a way of negotiating differences or simply being able to grow closer through a shared experience. Each of these four media literacy areas are examined in context with findings of this study more thoroughly below.

### *Play*

Play as defined by Jenkins (2009) provides individuals with opportunities to utilize skills that have direct payoffs within academic subjects, can serve as a scaffold for learning other forms of knowledge, and can help with the development of one's sense of self as a learner. Play from Jenkins' perspective is the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving. Attention and engagement are paramount in this concept of play. When an individual is engaged in the act of play, the goal matters to the individual. Ultimately, the goal of *Gone Home* is to solve the mystery of what happened to Kaitlin's family when she returns home. The feedback system in *Gone Home* comes in the form of discovering new areas to explore and new journal voiceovers that reveal new aspects of the emerging story. However, the game asks players to take an active role in piecing together the clues to construct an understanding of the environment and the background narrative.

Reflecting upon the emergent theme "Engagement in the Gaming Experience," this notion of engagement connects directly to Jenkins' (2009) perspective that games are more about engagement rather than fun. The finding that players felt engaged by the mystery and discovery elements of *Gone Home* as well as the hallmarks of interaction and choice support the media literacy connection of play. The interactive storytelling that many video games employ allow players to experiment by engaging in what Lauren called "*unfamiliar scenarios in safe situations.*" Games provide players with the ability to explore and experiment with new concepts and experiences without having lasting consequences as a result of failure. Narrative-focused



video games by extension can bring in socially relevant and emotionally charged content that can help players to discover for themselves how they understand in-game experiences in the context of the real world.

According to Gee (2008a), playing a video game involves a four-step process in relation to learning. Players will probe the virtual world (i.e. examining the game environment), form a hypothesis based upon reflection to determine what something in the game means, reprobe the game environment to test that hypothesis, and ultimately take the feedback of their actions to either confirm or rethink their hypothesis. During the gameplay observations of *Gone Home*, several participants verbalized their thoughts about the game's story and the direction they believed it was taking. Through the act of play, participants were developing a better understanding of the game's characters and the social issues addressed in its emerging story.

The majority of participants in this study reported occasionally playing through some video games more than once in order to make different choices or to approach the game from a different play style. This experimentation connects directly to Jenkins' concept of play and provides players with opportunities to try on new roles and see how other characters may react in response to player choices in the narrative. Player identities connect to this learning of content through the mediating effects of norms and goals, tools and technologies, and the context provided by the problem-solving space within the game (Gee, 2008b). However, this experimentation in problem-solving spaces can also connect to another closely related media literacy concept of performance.

### *Performance*

The media literacy concept of Performance refers to the ability of an individual to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. *Gone Home*, like many video games, asks the player to take on the role of a particular character. In *Gone Home*'s case, the player sees the world through the eyes of Kaitlin Greenbriar. Players may choose to play the game as if they are playing as themselves, as seen in the gameplay sessions of Mariah and

Jeremy, while others may attempt to more fully embody the character or role-play as the character, such as with Lauren and Colin. Even when players approach the game as if it were truly themselves in the game, *Gone Home* utilizes clear techniques to remind players that they are still playing as the character Kaitlin Greenbriar. They are reminded that they are being asked to perform the role of the eldest daughter of the Greenbriar family who has just returned from a year away.

Though it was unintended, it was revealed through interviews that Mikey, Colin, and Mariah all had experience with theatre when in high school. Whether this contributes towards their performative approach within the game is unclear. However, there were notable trends regarding how the participants in this study attempted to perform the role of Kaitlin. The core theme of “Playing the Role” highlights the performative stance that many players took while playing *Gone Home*.

During each interview, I asked participants how they believed they would have reacted to the events in the game if they actually happened to them. The responses given highlights the performative nature of video games. A subtheme that emerged across interviews and observations was the player’s realization that their experiences are within the context of playing a game. Though players had awareness that what they were experiencing in *Gone Home* was just a game and not reality, some participants performed the role of Kaitlin Greenbriar in different ways even within the same playthrough. Sometimes their behaviors were based upon their assumed expectations for behavior in reality (Mariah’s desire to be “tidy” with other people’s belongings comes to mind) and sometimes based expectations for how they believed Kaitlin would have behaved (picking up a Ouija board in search of clues even though Jeremy said he would never touch one in reality).

Gee (2008b) ties identity to the learning of content in his situated learning matrix. The finding that players are projecting themselves into the characters they embody while playing video games touches on the use of performance as a means of better understanding ourselves and

various social roles. Projective identities (along with real and virtual identities) used within video games may provide players with opportunities to explore and experiment with new identities and ways of thinking as a form of roleplaying (Jenkins, 2009). Therefore, narrative-focused video games like *Gone Home* provide an excellent example of how the media literacy concept of performance can be developed through these experiences.

### *Simulation*

The media literacy skill of simulation refers to the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. As has been covered previously, *Gone Home* is not a traditional video game. *Gone Home* is described by its designers as an interactive exploration simulator. The game takes place in a stylized yet realistic setting and follows the lives of what could be called a typical family from the United States in the 1990's. Given the game's focus on reality, it provides an excellent opportunity through which to examine a simulation of teenage life and family dynamics. While the game is a work of fiction, the game does attempt to replicate a real-world situation and environment for the player to explore. Additionally, *Gone Home* provides students an opportunity to experience how perspectives and opinions regarding LGBTQ issues have evolved since the 1990's. How Sam's parents reacted to the news that she is gay provides a unique opportunity to examine and contrast to current day perspectives, though from the stories shared by participants, perhaps it has not changed as much as we think. However, it is worth noting that all of the participants grew up in either Oklahoma or Texas, where the general population has conservative values (Pariona, 2017). While the game does provide a simulated environment for players to explore, the question becomes whether players actually treat this simulated real-world setting as if it were in fact a real environment. The answer appears to vary from player to player. For context, all participants were born 3-4 years after this game takes place where the central story revolves around a character who is roughly their current age. In turn, the game provides the participants of this study the opportunity to witness what it might have been like to have been a teenager over 20 years ago.

As was established by examining the role of Performance, some players, like Mariah, made conscious efforts to navigate the environment as if she were truly there. She would close doors and attempt to put objects back where they belonged. At one point, Mariah found a bulletin board in the second floor hallway just outside of Sam's bedroom with a pinned note from one of her parents about not leaving all of the lights on in the house. In response, Mariah stated, "*Uh. 'You're as bad as your sister', leaving all the lights on. As I've been leaving all the lights on the entire game (laugh).*" This note is written to Sam, but it is also directed at the player. As the player has taken on the role of Kaitlin, Sam's sister, this note is made to address the player as well. While playing the game, players would very rarely turn lights off once they had been turned on. Upon entering the house for the first time, the front door was left wide open (though Mariah and Lauren would eventually close it when passing by later in the game).

While the technology has evolved significantly since the 1990s, the social issues addressed in the game are still just as relevant today. The game does challenge players to consider how different the world is today with readily available internet and ways of staying connected that simply were not possible in 1995. When participants were asked what they might have done if the events of the game had actually happened to them, several participants said they would try to get in contact with their missing family members. This is in spite of the fact that internet availability to the general public was still an emerging technology at the time and that the phone lines were out due to the storm (not to mention that they would not have had a number for contacting their parents without the prevalence of cell phones today).

While *Gone Home* does simulate certain aspects of growing up as a teenager in the 1990's, the game itself is certainly not what a gamer would typically consider a simulation game. However, the game definitely replicates real social structures, family dynamics, and issues of discovering one's identity as a teenager. The ability for players to engage in the narrative and form their own interpretations of these replicated systems holds a strong educational value when paired with meaningful dialogue and discussion. Unfortunately, strong evidence of students

learning from the simulations and processes within game did not emerge in the data. Participants did frequently reference the family dynamics of the Greenbriar household, but they had to construct an understanding of these dynamics over the course of their playthrough.

### *Negotiation*

The final media literacy concept being examined is negotiation, or the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. *Gone Home* provides players with an opportunity to glimpse the life of a teenager discovering her sexual identity during a time in history when same-sex relationships were greatly misunderstood and less accepted than in current day (Smith, 2011). According to Jenkins (2009), engaging in diverse forms of media could potentially result in a greater sense of cultural understanding, yet there is an equal chance that preexisting biases and assumptions may cloud how these new experiences are read and interpreted. As hinted in the previous sections addressing aspects of media literacy, video games have the promise of allowing players to examine social injustices that exist within society. In the case of *Gone Home*, the game provides players with the opportunity to see how Sam Greenbriar began to discover her own sexual identity during a time period when the acceptance of same-sex relationships was significantly less common than in current American society. As players play the game, they see the world through the perspective of Kaitlin Greenbriar as they learn about Kaitlin's sister and the rest of her family. All participants in this study have biological or adopted siblings and were able to make connections to their own experiences as being a sibling by taking on the older sibling role in *Gone Home*.

Just as the concept of friendship emerged as a central theme for participants regarding how they situated the game's narrative into their own lived experiences, friendship emerged beyond just the confines of the single player experience. For example, Lauren described situations in *Life is Strange* that she felt she could learn from. For example, some of the

characters in the game held their problems back and did not reach out for help when they needed it. Lauren went on to note:

*Some of these characters like keep a lot of those, that information to themselves and like it, it's obviously a big mistake to like not tell someone at some point. So I feel like I kinda learn from their mistakes and that grows me as a person {?}. And then, {p} with Kaitlin, I (sigh) {p} I don't know if I learned the most from her character 'cause she {p} didn't really make the like the decisions. She just like found out what happened to her sister.*

This reinforces the importance of choice for many of the participants in this study. Feeling like they as a player can have an impact on the story appears to connect with how well a player feels connected to the story. Notice also that Lauren's connection to lessons she might have learned relate to her helping others deal with a difficult situation. Another interesting aspect of Lauren's narrative here is that she hopes to learn from the mistakes of characters. Video games allow players to make mistakes, sometimes with low-stakes consequences, in order to learn from those mistakes and learn how to develop new strategies for overcoming an obstacle. In the case of *Life is Strange*, if players make a decision and are unhappy with the consequences, the time control mechanic provides the opportunity to rewind time and make a different choice. In many narrative-focused games, a "correct" choice may not even exist. Even if a player perceives that they have made a mistake, a game will often continue by adjusting to the decision made. The concept of growth serves as a foundation of what Lauren views as one of the lessons that can be learned by learning from mistakes, both virtually and in reality. Looking back on Mariah's identity story, this same issue of growth emerged in her narrative.

Though narrative-focused video games can expose players with a variety of diverse perspectives that can connect well with this concept of media literacy negotiation, there was another level in which negotiation occurs outside of the media itself. As Jeremy reflected upon his family dynamic of being the middle child with an older brother and younger sister, he mentioned:

*I have to be the negotiator between the two at set times. I, I had a very good understanding of like what Kaitlin might have been thinking reading those notes and hearing like how the parents reacted, and hearing her like have anxiety, like do I, how do I talk to Lonnie about this, how do I do that, how it ends. I don't know, you can kinda, there's kinda a feeling that she felt bad that she couldn't be there as the sibling to {p} kinda walk her through some things.*

While his reflection pinpoints how he was able to connect his own experiences to better understand how Kaitlyn and Sam must have felt, it also touches on a social dimension of understanding and cooperation that occurs outside of the game world while playing video games with others.

While the media literacy concept of negotiation typically focuses on making connections and developing understanding of different perspectives in online communities, a notable trend emerged in the data that connects in a different way. Through it is not entirely the same, the social nature of playing games with others face-to-face showed connections to a broader sense of negotiation that can occur through video games.

### **Implications for Education**

The use of video games as a means of promoting engagement in the learning process is perhaps the idea that is most reinforced by the findings in this study. Gee (2008a) talks extensively about the connections between good video games and learning. Video games have the potential to expose players to a multitude of perspectives that may differ from their own as well as perspectives that may serve as reflections of their own attitudes, values, and ideals. Therefore, this study attempted to explore how playing narrative-focused video games may contribute towards a student's understanding of others through perspective taking. As seen in Chapter 4, research participants had the tendency to situate their in-game experiences within the context of their own lived experiences. One trend that emerged that may have had an impact on how well the participants were able to understand the characters in *Gone Home* came down to what details

captured their attention and which details they chose to ignore. However, this is where classroom instruction and discussion can help to teach and focus on the details and promote the connections that students are naturally beginning to construct.

With the nature of a video game using environmental storytelling, two players will likely have different experiences and nuanced differences in how they interpret the game's story and the issues that the game attempts to address. Over the course of *Gone Home*, the player finds a multitude of notes, postcards, stories, newspaper articles, and other forms of written communication throughout the game. With the observation that participants would selectively choose which objects to fully read and which ones to ignore, perhaps playing the game and then reading the stories again could assist with participant comprehension and understanding. Students have prior knowledge about a particular situation (the game story) and then are able to analyze the stories better than when they found them in the game originally after having gained additional context for analysis.

The key appears to be how to get players to devote their attention regarding how their own experiences can help them to relate to the characters and scenarios experienced within the game. This provides a common ground for addressing the dramatic differences that might exist between the player and the character. Carefully selected narrative-focused video games could connect with the teaching of the social sciences such as psychology, sociology, history, political science, and cultural geography. Using narrative-focused video games in a more formal educational setting provides an opportunity to direct students' attention towards issues that connect with social justice and differing cultural perspectives. For example, extensive discussions regarding the challenges that Sam and Lonnie faced in the 1990s compared to the current socio-political environment could be had, and participants were quick to connect their own experiences with their own friends' struggles with coming out. This connects well with the concept of critical play where questions about human life can be explored through occupying play environments as a



means of “careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 6).

A number of narrative-focused games exist that address themes that could be of potential use for developing greater understanding in the classroom. While participants shared a variety of games that told stories, many other potential options exist. By no means an all-inclusive list, a few examples of these games and the themes they address are shared below:

- **Valiant Hearts: The Great War** – Provides a stylized look at World War I and how the war personally impacted the lives of those on both sides of the conflict. Players can collect artifacts that share fascinating historical stories and information from that time period while telling personal stories on the impact of war.
- **That Dragon, Cancer** – An autobiographical game made by a husband and wife that explores the grief experienced as parents of a terminally ill child. The game tackles the themes of loss, love, hope, and compassion. This game is a challenge to get through not because of its difficult gameplay but because of the heart-wrenching emotions it can evoke.
- **Night in the Woods** – Through the use of anthropomorphic characters, the player takes on the role of 20-year-old college dropout returning home to a small town that’s been in economic decline for years. The game explores the socio-cultural aspects of America and the struggles of everyday life including issues of mental health.
- **What Remains of Edith Finch** – Through a lens of magical realism, the player takes on the role of Edith Finch who returns to the strange house where she grew up to discover the truth about a supposed family curse. The game explores a variety of psychological themes, the concept of family, mortality, and the idea of memorializing the past vs letting it go.

- **Firewatch** – Players take on the role of Henry who is trying to get away from his past as he takes up the post at a fire watch tower in a national forest. The game explores the philosophical concepts isolation, escapism, the nature of responsibility, and the need for connection.
- **Papers, Please** – Players take on the role of a border control agent of a fictional, fascist country. The game addresses issues of bureaucracy, poverty, and cruelty. You must decide to who to let into the country and who to turn away, but the game begins to create moral dilemmas for players that tests their sympathy for others.

All of these games provide excellent, interactive examinations of social issues that could be explored as a part of larger social science unit in the classroom. Future research exploring the various themes of these narrative-focused games and how to connect them to the curriculum stands as a promising venture.

Narrative-focused video games also provide an excellent means for teaching media literacy concepts. Players in this study effectively demonstrated the media literacies of play and performance while playing *Gone Home* through exploration, experimentation, and interaction and the ability to perform new roles in the context of the gaming environment. However, the media literacies of simulation and negotiation can be developed even more by more deliberative and focused discussions and probing analysis in the context of the college classroom. As participants played through *Gone Home*, what emerged from this simulated reality is that while all participants shared accepting opinions of LGBTQ individuals, story after story about their own friends and the struggles that their friends went through as they came out to friends and family still persist today. Educationally speaking, providing players with opportunities to discuss the connections they have made and to share the understanding of the phenomenon being depicted through the simulation may be the central key. This opens up the potential to explore issues of equality and ways to potentially overcome social injustices that persist today. Engaging in the simulation of sorts is simply the first step of a much broader discussion that needs to occur in

order to address these real societal and cultural issues. This also provides opportunities to negotiate different perspectives in the process of developing respect and acceptance while simultaneously bring awareness to our own implicit (or explicit) biases.

Situated learning theory views learning as a social process in which interaction and collaboration are central features. In this study, the importance of these social connections was evident in how the study participants shared the social nature of their gaming experiences. These students reported feeling the most emotionally invested when playing video games with others such as friends and family. Collaboratively working through problems faced within a game and connecting with another person emerged as an important aspect of what appealed to many of the participants in this study. This can be seen in the rise in Twitch streaming communities that have grown significantly over the last several years in which viewers will watch and interact with players who are streaming their gameplay (Harrison, 2015). Harrison goes on to explain that Twitch has become a social network for gamers and reports that “users joke around with each other, talk about their lives, and form friendships. Twitch helps users socialize” (n.p.). Bringing this social nature of gaming into the classroom as a means of building teamwork as well as a community around the issues being addressed within the game has some merit. While participants did not discuss negative experiences engaging in gaming communities, it is important to acknowledge that negative behaviors can be observed in many online games and discussion boards. This trend must be considered when attempting to engage in and develop these social communities.

Another salient application of games in the classroom again connects directly to media literacy education. For Jenkins (2009), play within a media landscape is one important component of being an engaged participant in what he calls participatory cultures. A participatory culture is a culture with low barriers of entry for civic engagement and expression (Jenkins, 2009). The creation and sharing of ideas and creations is welcomed and encouraged in this culture through an informal membership process where more experienced members share their knowledge with

those less experienced. While participatory cultures extend well beyond the confines of video games, this creates an opportunity for educators to embrace using video games as one way of teaching media literacy competencies. One implication could be the use of video games within group contexts, much in the same way that Tim Rylands utilized video games to essentially turn his primary school classroom into a participatory culture (see Chapter 2 for more details). This idea of participatory cultures ties closely with the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and affinity groups (Gee, 2010).

Introducing video games that address important social issues or provide insights from diverse perspectives within the classroom where dialogue and discussions can occur, might be a promising means to promote even more voices to be heard. This element of using narrative-focused video games as a tool to actively engage students that can spark authentic discussion, reflection, and evaluation connects with principles of situated learning. With participants reporting that they feel emotionally connected while playing video games with others, the focus has been placed upon gaming as a social activity and as an opportunity for bonding. Not only can narrative-focused games be utilized to teach concepts that have applications to the real world, but these games can also be utilized as a way of examining writing and the use of media. Having students write their own narratives, perhaps even exploring the life of Sam and Lonnie following running away together, could be a way of diving deeper into social inequalities they may have faced over the years.

Creating cognitive dissonance among our students through the use of powerful interactive media like video games provides a promising educational opportunity. The uncomfortable moments that make us question our assumptions and understanding of the world are rich opportunities for learning and change to occur. Recent research has found support of the idea that confronting cognitive dissonance can lead to empathic changes in behavior (Acharya, Blackwell, & Sen, 2018). Additionally, McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) contend that using cognitive dissonance during instruction that addresses issues of diversity results in students having an

increased awareness that this dissonance exists. As a result, addressing these cognitive distortions could potentially help to reduce student resistance while discussing topics such as diversity. Video games that explore issues of diversity and inequity in ways that create dissonance in the player has the prospect of engaging students more closely with these issues to broader perspectives and promote empathy.

Concluding my thoughts on the educational implications of this study, it is important to examine one potential obstacle regarding the use of video games in the classroom. While video games typically encourage high levels of engagement and motivation from the player, the question is whether these benefits will ultimately apply to a classroom setting. McGonigal (2011) proposes that games involve voluntary participation. The act of choosing to engage in these games versus being instructed to play a game for class needs to be considered when deciding to implement these practices into the classroom. Fostering an educational community of learners that buys into the idea may be a necessary first step.

### **Implications for Future Research**

A number of opportunities exist regarding future research in this area. This study was able to establish that the participating students situated their personal experiences into their gaming narrative experiences while utilizing perspective taking to construct meaning; however, more research needs to more closely examine the direct applications to the classroom. The first recommendation for future research involves better understanding the educational applications of these findings in practice. Future teacher research could provide new insights into how the use of narrative-focused video games can teach social issues as it applies to the more formal educational spaces. The observation that participants in this study were selectively choosing which written documents to read and which ones to skip in the game creates an opportunity to better understand this practice among students. Trying to understand how students make these judgements about what is meaningful, such as what is relevant to the story and what is not, would certainly be an area worth exploring further in future research.

A second potential area for future research involves looking at how the use of player-driven choice factors into how players construct meaning from those situations. Participants in the study and members of focus groups frequently discussed the importance of making choices in video games. For the purposes of this study, *Gone Home* was selected for participants to play through because of the personal stories that the game shares with the player. However, many narrative-focused video games have significantly greater levels of choice and decisions that the player must make in order to process. Often, but not always, these decisions will directly impact the progress of the game's story and even what areas of the game a player will encounter as a result. Even when decisions ultimately do not have an impact on the overall game experience, the illusion of choice and consequence for the player could tie in with the player's feeling of engagement in the experience. Exploring why players make the choices they do while playing a game could provide a promising area for future research, especially in regard to how these decisions impact their meaning making process.

This study found evidence that players were engaging in perspective taking behaviors concerning non-player characters (NPC's) they learned about while playing *Gone Home*. While participants did do some perspective taking with Kaitlin, the character they played as, they formed more emotional connections to the NPC's. A third opportunity for future research involves examining narrative-focused video games that require the player to directly take on the role of a character with a perspective that is significantly different from their own. This could provide great opportunities to examine the ability and willingness for players to perspective take and learn from this virtual experience. Kaitlin Greenbriar in *Gone Home* does exhibit specific personality traits as seen through the postcards she wrote to her family and the comments she would make in response to certain objects; however, Kaitlin also serves largely as a blank slate that allows players to project their own identities and personality into the character in the form of a projective identity. Examining how games with more established personas from diverse backgrounds that the player must embody could provide more insights into how situated learning

may occur through these games. Single player narrative-focused games that attempt to simulate real world situations in particular have the promise of helping to educate players on the importance of compassion and understanding. More research needs to be done to look at the impact of how dramatically different depictions of identity are situated by players.

A fourth opportunity for future research involves more closely examining participants' pre-existing tendencies for perspective taking before engaging with narrative-focused video games. Perspective taking occurred among all participants, but utilizing an empathy assessment to establish those pre-existing tendencies towards perspective taking would certainly aid in better understanding the differences that exist among different players. More extensive research is needed to more fully explore how repeated engagement with projective identities in video games may ultimately inform the multitude of identities a player possesses in the real world. While it appears that participants assimilated their experiences with narrative-focused video games, learning more about how and when these virtual experiences may lead to accommodation needs more exploration.

Finally, another way of potentially exploring how players take on different identities while playing narrative-focused video games is to create alternative ways in which the story is delivered in a particular game. This provides an opportunity to better understand the ways in which the player may utilize different identity roles in the process of constructing meaning from interactive narrative experiences. In the case of *Gone Home*, players are essentially experiencing the game in the form of Katie's reflection of what she had found in the house AFTER she found all of the letters written to her by her sister, Sam. Players have the benefit of hearing voiceovers of these letters spread across the entire game as they find items that helped Katie to connect the dots. The player has more contextual information than Katie does. However, the game also contains a modifier that turns off all of the voice diaries in the game. Turning on this modifier would allow the player to experience what Katie truly experienced, not having access to Sam's journal entries until the very end of the game. This would require players to undergo the same

process that the character of Katie must go through in order to piece together what evidence she saw in the house that connects with the words in Sam's letters at the game's conclusion. Having players play the game without the audio diaries turned on and then receiving all of the letters at the end would allow them to experience the game even more from Katie's perspective. Future research could examine differences in perspective taking and projective identities between different groups of participants exposed to these various conditions.

### **Final Reflections**

As I reflect upon the implications of this study on media literacy education and the role of identity in learning, I find myself thinking often about the Greenbriar family. I have played and watched *Gone Home* being played more times than I can count, and yet I still found things that surprised me or gave new insights into these characters over the course of this study. I feel like I know the Greenbriar family and care about them, and seeing the world from their perspective has only enhanced my understanding of my own identity and worldview. I wonder and contemplate what the lives of Kaitlin, Sam, Lonnie, Terry, and Janice are like today. In my mind, I imagine Sam and Lonnie are still together, overcoming the odds and finding happiness as society became more accepting of the love they shared. But I also think of the hardships they must have faced leaving home, setting off on their own, and the sacrifices they had to make. This reflects what I see as one of the true benefits of narrative-focused video games as an educational tool. With the proper discourse, I believe that students too can learn from these experiences through critical play as they learn more about the human experience as well as developing essential media literacy competencies.

I want to believe that at some point Sam was able to see her sister and parents again. They say you can't go home again, but I truly hope that Sam eventually found the love and acceptance she so desperately needed when she had finally...

*Gone Home.*



## REFERENCES

- Abernathy, T., & Rouse, R. (2014). *Death to the three-act structure: Toward a unique structure for game narratives*. Retrieved from Game Developer Conference 2014, <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1020050/Death-to-the-Three-Act>
- Acharya, A., Blackwell, M., & Sen Maya (2018). Explaining preferences from behavior: A cognitive dissonance approach. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(2), 400-411. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/694541>
- Anderson, C. A., Ihori, N., Bushman, B. J., & Rothstein, H. R. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in eastern and western countries: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 151-173.
- Banks, J. A. (2008). *An introduction to multicultural education* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York City: Pearson.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2008). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Brown, S. (2015). *How does play shape our development?* Retrieved from the TED Radio Hour episode Press Play, <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/390249044>
- Caballero, V. (2014). *Empathetic games are here to stay: What's next?* Retrieved from Game Developer Conference 2014, <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1020598/Empathetic-Games-Are-Here-to>
- Casper, V., & Thellhelmer, R. (2010). Children understanding the world through play. In *Early childhood education: Learning together*. Retrieved from [highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/dl/free/0073378488/791932/cas78488\\_Ch04pp95\\_125\\_R.pdf](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/dl/free/0073378488/791932/cas78488_Ch04pp95_125_R.pdf)

- Cassidy, S. B. (2011). The videogame as narrative. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28(4), 292-306. DOI: 10.1080/10509200902820266
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). *LGBT youth*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>
- Chase, S. E. (2010). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In W. Luttrell (Ed.), *Qualitative educational research: Readings in reflexive methodology and transformative practice* (pp. 208-236). New York: Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, B. (2003). The angst, anguish and ambitions of the teenage years. *Young Consumers*, 4(3), 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17473610310813870>
- Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication and Society*, 4(3), 245-264. DOI: 10.1207/S15327825MCS0403\_01
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Crotty, M. (2003). *The foundations of social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Deutsch, F., & Madle, R. A. (1975). Empathy: Historic and current conceptualizations, measurement, and a cognitive theoretical perspective. *Human Development*, 18(4), 267-287.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How do we think*. Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.

- Dubbleman, T. (2011). Playing the hero: How games take the concept of storytelling from representation to presentation. *Journal of Media Practice*, 12(2), 157-172. DOI: 10.1386/jmpr.12.2.157\_1
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Evans, J., & Pellegrini, A. (1997). Surplus Energy Theory: An enduring but inadequate justification for school break-time. *Educational Review*, 49(3), 229-236.
- Feldman, R. S. (2000). *Development across the life span* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Feldman, M. S., Skoldberg, K., Brown, R. N., & Horner, D. (2004). Making sense of stories: A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14(2), 147-170. DOI: 10.1093/jopart/muh010
- Festinger, L. (1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical play: Radical game design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, M. (2010). Creating critical play. In R. Catlow, M. Garrett, and C. Morgana (Eds.), *Artists Re: Thinking Games* (pp. 49-53). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. Retrieved from [www.maryflanigan.com/wp-content/uploads/CriticalPlay-ArtistsRethinkingGames-WithImages.rtf.pdf](http://www.maryflanigan.com/wp-content/uploads/CriticalPlay-ArtistsRethinkingGames-WithImages.rtf.pdf)
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, 2nd ed. (A. Sheridan, Trans.) New York: Vintage Books.
- Gee, J. P. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1), 15-39.

- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*, 99-125.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy: Revised and updated edition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, J. P. (2008a). *Good video games and good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning, and literacy*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Gee, J. P. (2008b). Learning and games. In K. Salen (Ed.), *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, (pp. 21-40). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2008c). Video games and embodiment. *Games and Culture, 3*, 253-263.  
doi:10.1177/1555412008317309
- Gee, J. P. (2009). Playing Metal Gear Solid 4 Well: Being a Good Snake. In D. Davidson (Ed.), *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning* (pp. 263-274). Pittsburgh, PA: ECT Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2010). *New digital media and learning as an emerging area and "worked examples" as one way forward*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). Stories, probes, and games. *Narrative Inquiry, 21*(2), 353-357. DOI: 10.1075/ni.21.2.14gee
- Gentile, D. A., Anderson, C. A., Yukawa, S., Ihori, N., Saleem, M., Ming, L. K., ... Sakamoto, A. (2009). The effects of prosocial video games on prosocial behaviors: International evidence from correlational, longitudinal, and experimental studies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 35*(6), 752-763. doi:10.1177/0146167209333045
- Giroux, H. A. (2000). *Stealing innocence: Corporate culture's war on children*. New York: Palgrave.
- Gordon, G. (2008). *What is play?* In search of a universal definition. Retrieved from [http://www.gwengordonplay.com/pdf/what\\_is\\_play.pdf](http://www.gwengordonplay.com/pdf/what_is_play.pdf)

- Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. M. E. (2014). The Benefits of Playing Video Games. *American Psychologist*, 69(1), 66-78. DOI: 10.1037/a0034857
- Gready, P. (2008). The public life of narratives: Ethics, politics, methods. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing Narrative Research*, (pp. 137-150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on aesthetic education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). London: Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (3rd ed.), (pp. 191-215). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harrison, J. (2015). *Why video-game streaming site Twitch is so incredibly successful*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/sean-plott-explains-why-twitch-is-so-successful-2015-3>
- Haas, A. (2017). What we know now: Updating best practices for talking about suicide & LGBT populations. Retrieved from <https://afsp.org/what-we-know-suicide-lgbt/>
- Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. (1993). Emotional contagion. *Current Trends in Psychological Science*, 2, 96-99.
- Hobbs, R. (2011). *Digital and media literacy: Connecting culture and classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

- Hocking, C. (2007). Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what the game is about. Retrieved from [http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html)
- Hsee, C. K., Hatfield, E., Carlson, J. G., & Chemtob, C. (1990). The effect of power on susceptibility to emotional contagion. *Cognition and Emotion*, 4, 327-340.
- Henig, R. M. (2008, February 17). *Taking play seriously*. New York Times, 38-45, 60, 75.
- Hinman, L. M. (1975). On work and play: Overcoming a dichotomy. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 8(3), 327-346.
- Human, K. (2010). The enthymematic model of meaning-making in video games: Towards narratively designed transmedia texts. (Master's thesis, Clemson University). Retrieved from [http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/955/](http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/955/)
- Isbister, K. (2016). *How games move us: Emotion by design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2004). Game design as narrative architecture. In N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, (pp. 118-130). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jones, R. (2007). Machinima: Gamers start playing director. In D. Macedo and S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media Literacy: A Reader* (pp. 486-491). New York: Peter Lang.
- Konrath, S., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(2), 180–98. DOI: 10.1177/1088868310377395
- Kramp, M. K. (2004). Exploring life and experience through narrative inquiry. In K. deMarrais and S. Lapan (Eds.), *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences*, (pp. 103-121). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Landsberger, H. (1959). Hawthorn revisited. *Social Forces*, 37(4), 361–364.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2574186>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*.  
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Levin, D. (2010). Remote control children: Combating the hazards of media culture in schools.  
*New Horizons in Education*, 58(3), 14-25.
- Martin, L. J., Hathaway, G., Isbester, K., Mirali, S., Acland, E. L., Niederstrasser, N., ... Mogil, J. S. (2015). Reducing social stress elicits emotional contagion of pain in mouse and human strangers. *Current Biology*, 25(3), 326-332. DOI:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.11.028>
- McFalls, E. L., & Cobb-Roberts, D. (2001). Reducing resistance to diversity through cognitive dissonance instruction: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 164-172. DOI: 10.1177/0022487101052002007
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York: Penguin.
- Mishler, E. G. (1999). *Storylines: Craftartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morganti, E. (2014). *Why 'Gone Home' Is a game*. Retrieved from  
<https://adventuregamers.com/articles/view/26743/>
- National Institute for Play (2009). Play science - the patterns of play. Retrieved from  
<http://www.nifplay.org/science/pattern-play/>
- Neander, K., & Skott, C. (2006). Important meetings with important persons: Narratives from families facing adversity and their key figures. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, 5, 295-311.

- Oliver, M. B., Bowman, N. D., Woolley, J. K., Rogers, R., Sherrick, B. I., & Chung, M. (2015). Video Games as meaningful entertainment experiences. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 5(4), 390-405. doi:10.1037/ppm0000066
- Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(3), 329-347.
- Oxford, R. L. (1997). Constructivism: Shape-shifting, substance, and teacher education applications. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 72(1), 35-66.
- Pariona, A. (2017). *The Bible Belt of the United States*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-bible-belt-of-the-united-states.html>
- Pew Research Center. (2003). *Let the games begin: Gaming technology and college students*. Retrieved from [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2003/PIP\\_College\\_Gaming\\_Reporta.pdf.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2003/PIP_College_Gaming_Reporta.pdf.pdf)
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Pinar, W. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Poindexter, C. C. (2002). Meaning from methods: Re-presenting narratives of an HIV-affected caregiver. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(1), 59-78.
- Qin, H., Rau, P. P., & Salvendy, G. (2009). Measuring player immersion in the computer game narrative. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 25(2), 107-133. DOI: 10.1080/10447310802546732
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rigby, S., & Ryan, R. M. (2011). *Glued to games: How video games draw us in and hold us spellbound*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of our minds: Learning to be creative*. West Sussex: Capstone.



- Rouzie, A. (2000). Beyond the dialectic of work and play: A serio-ludic rhetoric for composition studies. *JAC*, 20(3), 627-658.
- Rowling, J. K. (1998). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rylands, T. (2006a). Myst 'Exile' in the classroom. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5xFMmK5Ujs>
- Rylands, T. (2006b). Tim Rylands – BECTA awards segment. Retrieved at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSkE0qHIyA8>
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sandford, R., & Williamson, B. (2005). Games and learning. Retrieved April 21, 2009, from [http://ict.aps.nl/ictatelier/leraren/artikelen/games\\_and\\_learning.pdf](http://ict.aps.nl/ictatelier/leraren/artikelen/games_and_learning.pdf)
- Schwarz, G. (2005). Overview: What is media literacy, who cares, and why? In G. Schwarz & P. U. Brown (eds.), *Media literacy: Transforming curriculum and teaching. Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 104(1), (pp. 5-15). Chicago: NSSE.
- Smith, H., & Worch, M. (2010). What Happened Here? Environmental Storytelling. Presented at the 2010 Game Developers Conference. Retrieved from <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1012647/What-Happened-Here-Environmental>
- Smith, T. (2011). *Public attitudes toward homosexuality*. Retrieved from [http://www.norc.org/PDFs/2011%20GSS%20Reports/GSS\\_Public%20Attitudes%20Toward%20Homosexuality\\_Sept2011.pdf](http://www.norc.org/PDFs/2011%20GSS%20Reports/GSS_Public%20Attitudes%20Toward%20Homosexuality_Sept2011.pdf)
- Squire, C. (2008). Experience-centered and culturally-oriented approaches to narrative. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing Narrative Research*, (pp. 41-63). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Squire, K. (2002). Cultural framing of computer/video games. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 2(1), n.p. Retrieved from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/>.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tappin, S. (2017). 30 years of Samus Aran: A feminist icon? Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/39a1b88f-79dc-4602-8207-f86918afd457>
- Verenikina, I., Harris, P., & Lysaght, P. (2003). Child's play: Computer games, theories of play and children's development. Paper presented at Young Children and Learning Technologies. Selected papers from the International Federation for Information Processing Working Group 3.5 Open Conference, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from <http://crpit.com/confpapers/CRPITV34Verenikina.pdf>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), 6–18.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wang, H. (2014). A nonviolent perspective on internationalizing curriculum studies. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *International Handbook of Curriculum Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (pp. 67-76). New York: Routledge.
- Wesch, M. (2008). Anti-teaching: Confronting the crisis of significance. *Education Canada*, 48(2), 4-7.
- Wesch, M. (2009, January). From knowledgeable to knowledge-able: Learning in new media environments. *Academic Commons*. Retrieved from <http://www.academiccommons.org/files/Wesch.pdf>
- Wheaton, W. (2015, April). Anita Sarkeesian. *Time Magazine*, 185(15), Retrieved from <http://time.com/3822727/anita-sarkeesian-2015-time-100/>

- Wispé, L. (1986). The distinction between sympathy and empathy: To call forth a concept, a word is needed. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(2), 314-321.
- Xu, Y. (2010). Children's social play sequence: Parten's classic theory revisited. *Early Child Development and Care*, 180(4), 489-498.
- Zhang, Y. & Wildemuth, B.M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In Wildemuth, B. (Ed.). *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* (pp. 308-319). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Sample Focus Group Questions

**General Gaming Questions:**

Tell me about some of your favorite video games.

Summarize for me why you play video games and what appeals to you most about them.

How important is the story to you generally when you play a video game?

What kind of stories do you tend to enjoy? What makes for a good story in a video game? If possible, try to provide me with some examples using as much detail as possible.

Who are some of your favorite video game characters, and tell me a bit why that is.

What kind of characters do you enjoy playing in video games?

What games have you played where you had to create your own character? What thought do you put into the characters that you create? What is important to you about the character you create?

What is the most important thing a video game has ever taught you?

In your own words, recount one of the most memorable moments you experienced in a video game story.

## Appendix B

### Semi-Structured Individual Interview Questions

#### **Storied Experiences:**

Tell me about a time that you felt emotionally invested while playing a video game.

Share a moment when playing a video game that you felt that you understood how a character felt in the game.

When you take on the role of a character in a video game, what kind of identity do you want them to have?

Tell me about a time when you played a game from the perspective that was very different from your own lived experiences.

#### **Gone Home Questions:**

Try to put yourself in Kaitlin Greenbriar's perspective, how would you have reacted to what she experienced?

How do you think the game would have played if you played as someone other than Kaitlin Greenbriar?

Talk to me about any aspects of Gone Home's narrative that you connect with your own lived experiences.

Describe some of the objects you found in the game that were significant to you in some way.

Are there any characters from Gone Home that you particularly connected with?

What moments from the game stood out to you the most?

Have you or anyone you are close to ever experienced the issues that Kaitlin's family was dealing with?

#### **Gaming Artifact Questions:**

Questions will be adapted based on the screenshots and video clips participants saved during their observed playthrough.

## Appendix C

### Coded Themes from Interview, Focus Group, and Observation Data

1. approval
2. authoring
3. behaving inconsistently
4. character development
5. choice
6. coming out
7. connecting with others
8. dealing with change
9. difficulty understanding
10. discovering
11. embodied experiences
12. escape
13. exploring
14. following along
15. friendship
16. gaming conventions
17. helpless
18. historical context
19. identity
20. expressing emotion
21. interaction
22. judging
23. learning from games
24. media influence
25. mystery
26. negotiating
27. not reading
28. outcast
29. perception
30. performing
31. personal struggles
32. perspective taking
33. playing
34. possibilities
35. projecting self
36. rejection
37. relating
38. religion
39. self-harm
40. serious games
41. siblings
42. socializing
43. spoilers
44. teen drama

## Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, March 24, 2017  
IRB Application No ED1718  
Proposal Title: Narrative-Focused Video Games as Situated Learning: Media Literacy Implications of Play, Identity, and Perspective Taking  
Reviewed and Exempt  
Processed as:

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 3/23/2020**

Principal Investigator(s):

Shawn Rose	Pamela Brown
172 Stout	237 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74077	Stillwater, OK 74078

---

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.


- The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

- 1Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms
- 2Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
- 3Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and
- 4Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Hugh Crethar, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Shawn Rose

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: NARRATIVE-FOCUSED VIDEO GAMES AS SITUATED  
LEARNING: MEDIA LITERACY IMPLICATIONS OF PLAY, IDENTITY, AND  
PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Major Field: Education: Curriculum Studies

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education at  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Psychology at Texas Tech  
University, Lubbock, Texas in 2007.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Oklahoma  
State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2004.

Experience:

Ten years of experience as an academic advisor for the College of Arts and  
Sciences at Oklahoma State University.

Professional Memberships:

National Association for Media Literacy Education, Oklahoma Academic  
Advising Association, National Academic Advising Association