DEFINING VIDEOGAME ATMOSPHERES:
Böhme applied to *Gone Home* and *What Remains Of Edith Finch*

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Abstract: *Atmosphere* is an underdefined term in videogame studies. This paper reviews Gernot Böhme's aesthetic theory of atmospheres and adapts it to the analysis of videogames to make of atmospheres an analytical category. From this perspective, I analyse two videogames *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* to identify what elements are contributing to their affective atmosphere and suggest how they interact with each other. Drawing from Brian Massumi's reflections on affective resonance, I ponder as well on the interrelation between the games' atmospheres, their storyline and their mechanics.

Keywords: affect, audiovisual design, aesthetics, resonance, narrative.

In everyday language, the phrase «the atmosphere in the room» refers to the feeling one may experience when entering a space. The tense sensation after an argument or the solemn silence in a church are common examples of atmospheres in this sense. Gernot Böhme analyses this phenomenon and describes aesthetic atmospheres as the quality of the space in-between a perceiving subject and the surrounding objects. As will be explained below, Böhme considers that the light, the sounds, the objects and living beings present in a space contribute to the overall feeling in the room, so he calls them «atmospheric generators» (2017: 31). However, atmospheres can only be said to exist when a subject perceives them; they belong to the realm of experience. Therefore, an atmosphere is a «'between'-

phenomenon» (Böhme, 2017: 25). Böhme's theory is particularly useful because it provides a practical, concrete explanation of how aesthetic atmospheres originate, allowing for systematic analysis. He also explains the causal chain from objects in a space, to their perception, to their apprehension as emotions. Far from considering atmospheres a sort of ineffable excess, he points out that manipulating atmospheres is, in fact, the main task of many occupations. Stage or landscape designers, makeup artists, marketing or musicians would be in fact aesthetic workers, for they are concerned with the alteration of appearance (2017: 20-21). Here, I adapt Böhme's theory of atmospheres to the study of videogames.

Atmospheric videogame and *atmospheric storytelling* are quickly becoming buzzwords: highly evocative but under-defined concepts applied to a disparate range of ideas in videogame design and research. Ribeiro et al. (2020) and Müller et al. (2012) are examples of valuable scholarly articles that nonetheless call up the atmosphere of the videogame but avoid defining it and instead focus on a narrower aspect of videogame aesthetics. Ribeiro et al.'s paper does address the disparity of definitions of atmosphere in its literature review but then isolates «audiovisual thematic cohesion (i.e., thematic consistency in the relationship between sound and visual stimuli)» (2020: 110) for its empirical study. Audiovisual cohesion is a relevant aspect of the relationship between atmospheres and the game's overall aesthetic design but it is not a full definition of aesthetic atmospheres and does not explain why atmospheres —or their cohesion— are affective. I ground my understanding of aesthetic atmospheres in the work by Gernot Böhme so that, rather than a buzzword, *atmosphere* can become an analytical category in videogame studies. As we shall see, a videogame's aesthetic atmosphere is not solely concerned with its audiovisual design but also with the mechanics related to navigating space. Böhme explains that one's movement within a space is at least partly conditioned by the space's atmospheric quality. I argue that, in the case of videogames, this relationship can be reversed: navigation-related physics and mechanics are constituent of the videogame's atmosphere as well.

To examine videogame atmospheres, I compare *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) and *What Remains of Edith Finch*[1] (Giant Sparrow, 2017). Both are first-person walking simulators: slow-paced videogames without threats, demanding challenges, or intricate puzzles. Mechanics are deliberately minimal: mainly moving through interiors and piecing together past events from environmental traces. Their plots both concern, a young woman —the player character— that returns to an empty family home and searches for clues about her relatives' lives. The games differ, however, in how atmosphere relates to narrative progression and mediates these limited mechanics. Attending to these convergences and contrasts clarifies the nature and role of videogame atmospheres.

Studying the emotional apprehension of a videogame, however, must look beyond its atmosphere. While aesthetic atmospheres are highly relevant to the emotional

[1] *WRoEF* from now on.

quality of a videogame's mediated space, the rest of the mechanics and the storyline (if there is one) must also be taken into account. Although not the main focus of this paper, I draw from Brian Massumi's branch of affect theory to ponder on the integrated aesthetic experience of videogames. Massumi theorises the compound nature of affect, in which each stimulus infolded by the body is modified by stimuli that came before and those coming right after. In «The Autonomy of Affect» (1995), he argues that stimuli may enter in a relationship of resonance or dampening with each other. After the review of Böhme's theories and the analysis of *Gone Home*, I will briefly reconsider Massumi's explanation and venture an approach to the difference between playing *Gone Home* and *WRoEF* from the perspective of affective resonance.

Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres

Böhme explains his aesthetic theory as «concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This 'and,' this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere» (2017: 12). This means that he is interested in the way our surroundings can influence our emotions and moods. At the same time, one of Böhme's key points is that atmospheres are a quality of space: «atmospheres fill spaces» (2017: 25). Therefore, atmospheres are identified with what connects the feeling subject and their surroundings, that is, with the space in-between. For his formulation to work, he must explain how subjects and objects can be said to relate to each other in the void in-between.

Böhme carefully considers the ontological constrains of Western philosophy (2017: 18-19) to reformulate objects. Kantian philosophy understands objects as self-contained items that possess qualities. These qualities —such as form, volume or colour— differentiate them from other objects and confirm their unity. Böhme theorises objects in terms of their perceivable presence instead. To use Böhme's same example, Kantian philosophy would consider that a blue cup *has* the colour blue, as well as a given size or smell. Böhme, on the other hand, pictures the cup's blueness as «the way in which it goes forth from itself» (2017: 19). This going forth he also calls the «ecstasies»[2] of objects and refers to all the ways in which an object alters the space around it by its mere presence. Thus, not only the colour, smell or sound of an object would irradiate into space. Form and volume are ecstasies as well because they alter the shape of the remaining space. If we think of an empty room and then the same room full of boxes, we can probably appreciate how the boxes' volume would alter the shape of the space inside the room. In the second scenario, the room's atmosphere might come across as claustrophobic. Now, if we imagine the room full of blue cups instead of brown cardboard boxes, the shape, colour and smell of the space inside the room would change as well.

[2] The spelling of this term changes depending on the translation.

Different objects and their position alter the space's atmosphere. Same goes for light and sound: daylight and a cheerful song in the background is likely to make the room more inviting than the dim light of a little lightbulb and a tense soundtrack. Therefore, Böhme considers that objects —in the widest sense of the term— are atmospheric generators. This shift in perspective allows any object to be ontologically understood as affective, as having an impact in their surroundings by their presence.

Böhme's theory of atmospheres is useful because it allows us to explain how atmospheres are brought about. What is more, it allows us to *say* that one can, deliberately, design towards invoking a particular atmosphere. However, atmospheres themselves cannot be produced, for they are not an object but an in-between: «the manipulation of objects serves only to establish conditions in which these phenomena [aesthetic atmospheres] can emerge» (Böhme, 2017: 31). Without a subject to perceive the space, we just have a room full of things. Böhme locates perception at the level of the body rather than in the mind: «the human being must be conceived essentially as body» (2017: 18). In line with phenomenology, Böhme's subject refers to a body that is permeable and open to outside stimuli rather than experiencing the world only through its cognitive abilities. He argues that atmospheres «are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space» (Böhme, 2017: 19). This «sensing» which is at the same time «a bodily state» refers to the body's constant openness to the environment; an openness that leads to alterations in the body: in one's feelings, one's «state». Affect theory coincides with phenomenology on this respect, arguing that our bodies are always already sensing the space around, taking in stimuli and reacting to them, even without our notice (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). It follows that atmospheres come to be felt because subjects are sensitive to their environment and to the objects' ecstasies in it. Atmospheres arise from the conjunction of present objects and a perceiving subject. Atmospheres are the spaces affectively charged by the ecstasies of what is present and taken in by a subject.

Together with defining atmospheres, another important contribution of Böhme's is theorising how they come to be felt as emotions. He turns to synaesthetic experiences, by which a colour might seem cold or a musical note, sharp, and argues that «feelings intervene in the economy of the body, [...] and can hence be experienced physically» (2017: 72). This means that both sensorial perception and emotional feelings are experienced bodily, and therefore a feeling of heaviness might manifest both when carrying something or —independently of sensorial stimuli— when feeling sad. This suggests that our body experiences similar corporeal sensations both because of external stimuli or internal emotions (2017: 72). Böhme writes: «by feeling our own presence, we feel the space in which we are present» (2017: 137), that is, subjects perceive the atmosphere by sensing its impact on their «bodily economy». How we characterize an atmosphere —as romantic, oppressive, solemn, comforting— would correspond with our felt state at becoming

in contact with it (Böhme, 2017: 28). They are quasi-objective because they are, to an extent, determined by the present objects, and also subject-like because they act on the perceiving subject, altering their mood (Böhme, 2017: 19). Böhme argues that atmospheric perception «is deep and subcutaneous, as a rule even unconscious», and it is only once we become aware of an atmosphere's impact that we might try to analyse it and determine its origin (2017: 146). Therefore, reflecting upon an atmosphere and giving it a name implies naming its felt affect.

The fact that Böhme's theory of affective atmospheres requires a subject present in space does not preclude the possibility of atmospheres existing in virtual spaces inaccessible to our physical bodies. Despite his focus on real spaces, Böhme does not fully reject the atmospheric capacity of art. He observes that a piece of literary or pictorial art does not just communicate through signs that «a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but it conjures up this atmosphere itself» (2017: 22). Therefore, a book or a picture does not merely represent an atmosphere but can create it too within itself. Even when atmospheric generators are out of reach —on paper, in the painting, on the screen— and tactile or olfactory ecstasies are apparently lost, their visual apprehension still carries the memory of their embodied sensations and so irradiate into the atmospheric space nonetheless (Böhme, 2017: 147). Moreover, when discussing ways of representing architecture in film, Böhme suggests that «those elements of vision that contain motion —changes of perspective and focal point— are best suited to conveying an impression of space» (2017: 137) inside and around the represented building. Given that videogames can combine text and audiovisual information, and have the capacity to build navigable space, it seems appropriate to apply Böhme's theories to videogames' mediated space.

Several authors have explained how navigable space and the capacity of acting within a videogame's virtual world can create the illusion of being integrated within that space oneself —imperfect, partial and delicate as this illusion is. Janet Murray identified spatiality as one of the essential properties of digital environments (2017: 79) and theorised that the capacity to make changes within them reinforces the sense of being part of this digital space (2017: 109). Rune Klevjer adopts a phenomenological perspective to explain how the avatar mediates players' presence in the digital space by enabling their actions, as «a prosthetic extension of the player's body-in-the-world» (2022: 98). In allowing the player's actions, the avatar «enables us to experience a simulated environment as something that we can inhabit; a 'world' that we belong to» (2022: 95). This means that apprehending the game-world through the controlled movement of an avatar and/or point of view allows the player to perceive the game's spatiality. Even in two-dimensional videogames, where there is no perspective, there is still spatial movement. Brendan Keogh (2018) explains how interacting with videogame sensorially —that is, looking at, listening to, and touching the videogame and interface— affords a sense of presence «'in' the videogame» (2018: 13). Finally, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that virtual environments with a narrative element —as is the case of many contemporary videogames— enhance the player's sense of presence in the digital environment

by means of spatial, temporal and emotional imaginative immersion in the storyworld (2015, chap. 10). An atmosphere perceived through digital representation inside a screen might not register as powerfully on the body's spatial awareness as that of the player's physical space. However, the combined affordances of audiovisual, narrative and spatial navigation of a videogame are able to build aesthetic atmospheres. The following section analyses the atmosphere in *Gone Home*.

Gone Home: a gothic atmosphere for an optimistic story

Gone Home's atmosphere has elements belonging to the gothic tradition. Tanya Krzywinska (2015) analyses the gothic in videogames and we can find coincidences with Böhme's work in her description of gothic *mise-en-scène* and style. Firstly, she argues that not any individual style element brings about the gothic. Instead, it is matter of how these elements come together as patterns —or constellations (Böhme, 2017: 25)— and how these patterns recall the gothic tradition (Krzywinska, 2015: 60). The setting and audiovisual style create together «indirect, environmental storytelling» (Krzywinska, 2015: 60), that is, they convey information by means of the environment's atmosphere. Such environmental storytelling is «linked in to a player's traversal of the game space and contributes to the creation of a stronger sense of presence within the game world for a player, thereby providing a foundation potentially for the generation of affect» (Krzywinska, 2015: 60). Where Krzywinska is tentative about environmental design —perceived through movement in space— laying the «foundation potentially» for affect, Böhme asserts that environmental space is affective as holder of objects' ecstasies. Krzywinska uses «gothic affect» (2015: 58) to refer to the emotional state that, she argues, gothic fiction attempts to create. Among the characteristic «psychologically affective emotional states» of the gothic, Krzywinska lists «paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread, discomfort, disorientation» (2015: 60). She argues that, ideally, these emotions would be evoked not only through its atmosphere but all across audiovisual, narrative and mechanic design to achieve a full representation of the gothic in a videogame (2015: 58). When Böhme establishes that atmospheres are perceived through bodily sensations, he is rejecting the idea that our environment is understood as signs and symbols that must be intellectually decoded. He makes the following distinction: «A flat roof doesn't 'mean shelter and psychological protection', as [Charles] Jencks suggests, one can say at best that it suggests security, that is, it contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of security» (2017: 162). Krzywinska's environmental storytelling can be understood in these terms too, that is, as sensations that affectively inform players' actions by modulating their feelings rather than by recalling previous formal knowledge of the gothic.

Upon starting *Gone Home*, the player sees the menu screen and title image (figure 1). It is a static bidimensional picture but it already contributes to establishing the game's atmosphere. Gothic tales are often set in «haunted houses, spooky woods,

crypts and graveyards, derelict buildings, attics and cellars» (Krzywinska, 2015: 59-60). Here, the player sees a large 19th century house at night framed by the spindly silhouettes of fir trees. This suggests that, rather than a community, a forest surrounds the house, which intensifies the feeling of seclusion. Darkness hinders vision and so generates a distressing, disorienting atmosphere. The single lit window, in disproportion with the large, apparently empty house, emphasizes the loneliness in this atmospheric assemblage. The front door, ajar but opening into total darkness, creates an *unheimlich* contrast between the inviting gesture but the unwelcoming prospect. These atmospheric generators together likely evoke the feeling that venturing inside might be dangerous.

Figure 1. *Gone Home* menu screen

The background music only intensifies the feeling of unease. It consists in a droning musical chord that creates a sense of suspense in its sustained irresolution, and a sense of gravity with its low, reverberating tonality. This chord continues as we start a new game, a black screen replaces the picture of the house and we hear the beep of a 1990s answer machine followed by the cheerful voice of a young woman. She is announcing to her mother her return from Europe on a midnight flight and asks her not to pick her up, she has arranged a shuttle. The audio information, lacking context, prolongs the player's disorientation. Regardless of the linguistic message, the voice —upbeat and confident— clashes with the still droning background chord and the inscrutable black screen. Böhme agrees here with Kant, who «distinguished the tone in which something is said from the meaning communicated through signs, the tone allowing us to share directly in the emotion of the

speaker» (Böhme, 2017: 173). Therefore, the affective mismatch between the woman's voice and the environment contributes to an unsettling atmosphere, for it seems that the speaking woman is unaware of the atmosphere of danger the player has been presented to.

The player's capacity to move within the videogame begins right after the young woman's message. Players find themselves in a closed porch. Moving the viewpoint around, one can ascertain that the outdoors is in darkness —again indicating night-time— but contrary to the starry sky in the menu screen, the sound cues suggest inhospitable weather. There is no background music but we hear heavy rain, intermittent thunder —which might startle the player— and strong winds, representing a storm. Storms are another powerful atmospheric generator associated with the gothic repertoire. The arguably natural inclination to take shelter contributes to a threatening atmospheric assemblage. As we step into the house, the droning musical chord is heard again and the light flickers, rendering the space almost completely black several times. This suggests that the light source is unreliable and so is the player's ability to see and feel comfortable in this space. Simon Niedenthal adds vulnerability and uncertainty as key affects in gothic fiction and observes that videogames often achieve them by keeping the player from fully apprehending their surroundings (2009: 173). Specifically, Niedenthal identifies obscurity —blocking the player's ability to perceive the space by means of darkness, labyrinthine structures or other obstacles such as fog— as one of the resources to create this affect (2009: 175-177). If not darkness, at least gloominess persists during gameplay in *Gone Home*. Although we can turn on the light switches in the house, the brightness of the image remains very low throughout the game. The player might feel obligated to dim the light of their physical room, which is perhaps a way for the developers to extend the atmosphere of the videogame's mediated space out into players' physical space. At this point, the player can begin exploring the house, which is the main mechanic in the game. In line with the labyrinthine castles of gothic literature, this house is considerably large, with many rooms and corridors, some locked doors and hidden passageways. Another resource to create gothic affect in games is vastness —a space that is made to feel incommensurable and disorientating (Niedenthal, 2009: 177-178). This impression is exacerbated by the fact that the house map available to the player is incomplete; it is drawn only as each room is explored.

Gone Home rewards thorough exploration of the house with information about the family. The player thus behaves like a detective to reconstruct the events leading up to everyone's absence. For mechanics to contribute to the sense of helplessness and vulnerability typical of the gothic, there should be an attempt «to undermine a player's sense of mastery and unmitigated success» (Krzywinska, 2015: 65). The player's unhindered capacity allows rather than undermines the sense of mastery, which is not conductive to gothic affect. However, the logic of movement within a videogame is another atmospheric generator. Böhme observes that the disposition and design of a space —its atmosphere— have an impact on how our

bodies are disposed inside it, how we move through it (2017: 130). For example, because of the sense of threat at the beginning of the game, players tend to move guardedly through the house in *Gone Home*, proceed cautiously and look tentatively around the corners before walking into the next room. Nevertheless, this relationship can be reversed. Just like the affective atmosphere conditions the way players move, mechanic capabilities also condition the player's affective state. The laws of physics are a constant on Earth but designed anew in each videogame, allowing for expressiveness on this point too. Some videogames may endow the player with extraordinary abilities: flight, strength, speed. Games like *Gone Home*, on the other hand, limit the player: here the player character cannot run, jump, attack or defend herself. The affective atmosphere of a space and our bodily orientation create a feedback loop, so the limited capacities of our player character contribute to the feeling of vulnerability in the threatening house. Players' capacity to put information together and reach the conclusion of the game may be unhindered but their movement is limited, adding to the sense of vulnerability. Whereas *Gone Home*'s mechanics may not fully meet Krzywinska's condition for gothic affect, they allow limited mastery.

Nevertheless, *Gone Home* cannot be said to convey gothic affect in all its facets. Against gothic affect is *Gone Home*'s narrative. This videogame begins when Kaitlin, the oldest daughter of a traditional family, returns to her home in Oregon, USA, after a year of traveling. In the meantime, her family had inherited a house from a recently deceased great-uncle, Oscar Masan, and had moved in. This justifies narratively that Kaitlin —our player character in 1st person perspective— is as unfamiliar with it as the player. The goal for both Kaitlin and the player is to piece together what happened in her absence with her sister, Sam, and their parents, Terrence and Janice. The main storyline is conveyed through Sam's diary entries addressed at Kaitlin and triggered as voiceover narrations when key objects are found. Her story comes across as a realistic portrayal of a teenage romance between her and her classmate Lonnie. It retells tender moments and only towards the end do they experience homophobic pressures from Sam's family and the US military, which Lonnie aspires to join. The reason why the house is empty upon Katie's arrival is that Sam and Lonnie had eloped while the parents were away at a marriage counselling retreat. While the prospect of two teenagers out on their own is concerning, the ending carries an optimistic tone. Especially since the player is led to believe that Sam may have committed suicide instead —tragic endings being by no means unexpected in queer stories. Only Uncle Masan seems to have a dark secret, a trope in line with gothic fiction. There are very few hints about his life but there are clues that suggest he had paedophilic behaviours and might have hurt Terrence in his childhood. For all the suggestion of supernatural presence in the house, the supernatural never appears. Not even in relation to Sam and Lonnie's light-hearted ghost-hunting games. The storyline is thus at odds with the game's atmospheric generators. Only some of them are in line with the tone of the story, such as Sam's voice, whose tone agrees with the events she is retelling. It is upbeat, tender or sad as appropriate. There are also Riot Grrrl music tapes or a blues vinyl

that can be found and played by placing them in the appropriate device, helping to contextualize the characters of Terrence and Sam respectively. The expansive energy of punk is particularly at odds with the oppressive atmosphere built by the subdued colours and low brightness. The gothic atmosphere otherwise prevails alongside the non-gothic story.

Despite the disconnect between the overall atmosphere and the storyline, *Gone Home* is coherent. The game designers toy with players' expectations as the horror tropes are ironically undermined at different points. The gothic atmosphere for a non-gothic story could be understood as a continuation of this game of bait-and-switch. Relatively early in the exploration, a report from an electrician in the room labelled in the game map as 'Dad's Office' states that the wiring is safe but old and prone to occasional malfunctions, hence the flickering lights. Walking the hall towards the 'TV Room', a male voice is heard but it is simply a weather broadcast coming from the turned-on TV. In the ensuit toilet in 'Sam's Room', there is an alarming splash of red on the bathtub. The vibrancy of the colour red has long been identified for its attention-grabbing ecstasy. However, there is a red hair dye bottle next to it and when the player picks it up, Sam's narration talks tenderly about helping Lonnie dye her hair and how intimate it felt to touch her.

Affective resonance

Coherent as the tone duality in *Gone Home* may be, the combination conditions emotional engagement. Brian Massumi, one of the referents in affect theory, uses the term *resonance* in relation to an experiment testing children's reaction to three versions of the same short film: one with musical accompaniment but without verbal narration, another voiced over with a factual narration of the events, and a final one which had factual narration but also comments on the emotional states of the characters (1995: 86-87). The experiment showed that the factually described version was the least liked and most poorly remembered. By contrast, the mute one was the best liked version but the one with emotional comments —while only slightly less liked than the mute one— was the version best remembered by its viewers. Massumi concludes that audiovisual information and narration can affect each other differently. He theorises affect as recursive, the body infolding every stimulus while the previous has not yet been fully processed, so the infolding of and reacting to every stimulus is simultaneous with and affected by the continual in-flooding of perceptions. The point Massumi makes regarding the short film is concerned with the registering of affective intensity. He suggests that when narration just explains the scene factually, there is a «redundancy of signification» in which the narrative hampers the emotional processing of the scene by forcing a focus on the linearity of actions and reactions. The result would be a «dampening» or lessening of this intensity (1995: 86). On the other hand, the emotional narration might provide the punctuations in this linear flow necessary for the affective intensity to be perceived

more fully. When narration does not just verbalize what is visible but adds complementary information —in this case narrating both the thoughts and feelings of the characters in the short film— Massumi observes that language and image resonate with each other and amplify the emotional intensity of the scene «enabling a different connectivity» (1995: 87) by virtue of mirroring the non-linear flow of affect. Language does not usually purely resonate or interfere with images but —depending on which role it predominantly enacts— language would belong to different orders of affective impact (1995: 87). In the case of *Gone Home*, however, it would rather seem that the almost total tonal detachment between storyline and atmosphere dampens full apprehension of either, as much as the linear narration of Massumi's example.

Gone Home is often credited for being the first commercial success for a walking simulator, meaning that, for many players, this was the first videogame that lacked most of the expected features —such as combat or puzzles— and demanded a different kind of engagement. The tense atmosphere of the gothic tradition might be a means to keep players attentive to their surroundings even when the level of stimuli is much lower than in its contemporary commercial games. However, attending to the game's overall emotional resonance, the disconnect between atmosphere and narration becomes more evident. Böhme describes stage designs as «atmospherically charged spaces in which a drama can evolve» (2017: 69). Atmospheres provide the context and background against which specific situations, objects or their arrangements are perceived and understood (2017: 73). The drama in *Gone Home* is that of a young queer couple discovering the beauties and struggles of relationships while Janice is tempted into an affair with a colleague and Terrence struggles with the decline of his career as a fiction writer. The atmospherically charged space in which these dramas evolve is, however, primed for a different kind of story. The affective resonance of atmosphere and narrative in *Gone Home* is hindered, not because of redundancy, as in Massumi's example, but because they convey different affects. The affective bandwidth of the player is always divided between the tensions of the gothic atmosphere and the domestic drama of its dwellers.

What Remains of Edith Finch: Tension between melancholia and hope

WRoEF, contrary to *Gone Home*, does not present conflicting tones. This is a story of loss, grief, and the struggle to live with it. There is tension between the love for those departed and the pain for their loss but it ends with a life-affirming message. This message is articulated not only through the narrative and mechanics but also in its atmosphere, all elements resonating together. The player character is Edith Finch, the last member of the Finch family. She returns to her childhood home, now empty, to understand her family history. A curse supposedly weighs on it, responsible for bringing an untimely death to many of Edith's relatives. There are several differentiated aesthetic spaces throughout *WRoEF*, making it

more atmospherically complex than *Gone Home*. On the one hand, Edith's search lasts from dusk till dawn and takes her outdoors and indoors. On the other hand, there are several changes of point of view throughout the game. The bedroom of each of the previous family members has been kept intact after the wishes of Edith's great-grandmother, Edie, the longest-living Finch and family matriarch. In each bedroom, the player is transported into a sort of minigame, each with its own atmospheric generators and sometimes even with an entirely different art style than the frame story (figure 2). The scope of this paper only allows me to analyse the atmospheric changes experienced by Edith, which are co-dependent with the evolution of the storyline.

Figure 2. Screenshots of four of the minigames

The first atmospheric variation is the contrast between outdoor and indoor locations at the beginning of *WRoEF*. After a very brief screen with the game's title and an upbeat organ melody, players find themselves already in command of a point of view in 1st person perspective but cannot yet move their player character. Players can see the stern of a boat, a mass of water and small islands retreating. It is daytime but overcast, which manifests in the desaturated colour palette. The player character has a journal with 'Edith Finch' written on the cover. When the player opens it, the text of the first page is readable on the screen. The voice of a young woman narrates it out loud and the image fades into a view of the Finch house at the end of a path in the woods (figure 3). The house looks drab, with overgrown vegetation and debris scattered around, all of which contributes to an atmosphere of abandonment. Its architecture is unsettling: a sprawling structure with a precarious, tower-like appendage balanced on wooden beams (figure 4). Far from inspiring

comfort and shelter, the house seems to be the source of the danger, if only because of its neglected state and unreliable structure.

Figure 3. First view of the Finch house

Figure 4. The Finch house

As we can see, the atmospheric tone so far also shares traits with the gothic tradition. For example, there is obscurity once more, as analysed by Niedenthal

(2009: 175-177). While on the boat, the mist prevents players from seeing the fir-tree covered islets in detail. Instead, they just look dark. Facing the stern of the boat allows the player to see what was left behind but not where one is heading. These features build a sense of uncertainty and lack of control characteristic of gothic affect. The derelict house and the forest are recurrent gothic settings. The overwhelmingly tall firs around the Finch house make one feel small in comparison and —as in *Gone Home*— build a sense of isolation. The subdued colour palette contributes to a gloomy, melancholic atmosphere. Moreover, there is no music throughout this section. On the boat, the relative silence is only broken by the sound of the boat's engine, the lapping water and the cry of seagulls. Combined with the sense of uncertainty evoked visually, this sounds emphasize the sense of loneliness. In the forest, not even birds sing, making the silence eery and unnatural. There is just Edith's footsteps and her narration. As an atmospheric generator, Edith's voice sounds melancholic throughout the game. The volume is low, the inflection rather flat, and there is a breathy quality to it, as if she was sighing. While the unwelcoming presence of the house and its environment contributed to an uncanny and slightly threatening atmospheric assemblage, Edith's calm voice and the daylight tones feel more desolate than scary. Once at the house door, windchimes tinkle nearby, their sound is pleasant yet slightly high-strung, carrying an edge of urgency.

In *Gone Home*, Kaitlin was as foreign to the house as the player but the narrator and player character in *WRoEF*, Edith, is intimately familiar with hers. At narrative level, the player is the recipient of Edith's journal, like Kaitlin was to Sam. This shift impacts players' position since it broadens the knowledge gap between them and the player character. In this game section, the gap is employed to increase the sense of mystery and disorientation, which runs parallel to the affective quality of the atmosphere. In fact, Edith begins with an apology to the addressee, excusing herself that some of the things she will tell might not make immediate sense. Among other cryptic statements, she confesses she used to be afraid of the house as a child, further predisposing the player to find danger inside it.

However, once the player gets into the house, the atmosphere undergoes a striking shift. One must enter through the shed, which can also be a liminal space at the fringes of domesticity, associated with dusty objects and vermin. *WRoEF*, however, subverts this expectation. Beams of warm, peach-hued sunset light stream into the rooms, with suspended glittering dust particles lending the space an almost magical quality (figure 5). For the first time, non-diegetic music plays —a simple, melancholic but pleasant melody reminiscent of the soft tune of a music box. The inhospitable gothic-inspired atmosphere outdoors highlights the contrast with the appealing interior, demonstrating that the house is not a threatening space after all. Edith's words capture the change: to her surprise, she says, coming inside made her feel at home for the first time in very long. Ewan Kirkland (2020) argues convincingly that *WRoEF* successfully adapts the gothic tradition to the video-game medium. He offers an in-depth analysis of the melancholy in Edith's voice, the uncanniness of the forest and the house, the gothic trope of the family curse

and the morbid reenaction of so many deaths. Indeed, the change of atmosphere does not fully dispelled the gothic. However, Kirkland does not consider the meaningful tension between the positively and negatively charged atmospheric generators that make of *WRoEF* an emotionally and psychologically rich game.

Figure 5. The shed in the Finch House

As Edith explores the family house, there is a constant balance between a sense of foreboding that does not cross into fear, and whimsy and magic that does not fully lighten the tone; a balance maintained through atmospheric design. The hidden passageways are a good example. Hidden corridors belong to the gothic tradition as a potential setting for terror, for they usually lead to places off the bounds of normativity. In *WRoEF*, however, they are unexpectedly inviting. Edith's narration frames the first hidden passage as a threshold into the secrets of the family, building the sense of mystery. What is discovered, however, is a space of play. Inside the hidden passage, there is a little window with stained glass that sheds colourful lights into the well-lit space, which is scattered with children's toys and drawings. Coming in triggers a soft soundtrack that rises and heightens the sense of expectation but does not provoke tension. Later, the player learns that these hideaways were built by Edith's great-grandfather for his children's amusement and this one connects two of their bedrooms. Simultaneously, Edith's narration, in her characteristically despondent voice tone, retains a subdued note in the atmosphere. She cannot interact with the toys and is too big to move much within the small passage. Those toys belonged to children who are not there anymore and their absence becomes almost palpable because their toys remained. The affective atmosphere, brought about by dusk light, soft music and wealth of personal objects echo the narrative

content of the game: the tragedy of each passing child together with their cherished memory, scrupulously preserved by the mourning style of great-grandma Edie, who refused to overwrite their traces in the house.

The main body of the house contains the rooms of great-grandma Edie's children. Moving on to exploring the bedrooms of the next generation brings an atmospheric change: from dusk to nighttime. Edith comes out of the house and follows a path that leads her along the family cemetery and back to the house, into the attic. This outdoors section is very dark, the player is kept from seeing the surroundings clearly. Although the game design establishes only one path for the player to follow, its outline is not immediately obvious to the player. This moment of physical disorientation coincides with a moment of confusion for Edith, who is reviewing the ways her family has dealt with grief and contending with herself whether there is a correct one or the deadly curse could be even true. The atmosphere is not scary, though, because soft extra-diegetic music and Edith's calm voice accompany the player throughout. Back in the house, the bedrooms of the following two generations are explored in darkness, only relieved by some dim electric lights. The parents of these generations, Sam and Dawn, great-grandma Edie's son and granddaughter respectively, had grown up under the weight of loss and desperately tried to avoid it. Most of the warmth radiated into the main body of the house by the sundown light is gone, leaving the coldness and uncertainty of darkness to give atmospheric presence to Sam and Dawn's anxiety. However, even in this darkness the dust glitters in the moonlight and the music, sound effects and Edith's voice retain their calm, melancholic quality. Darkness is disorienting and dismal but not threatening.

The darkness of night does not come to an end until Edith's own demise at the end of the game. Her musings had taken her to conclude that life is tragic, its mysteries unknowable, but beautiful and worth living and cherishing nonetheless. The screen fades to white and it is implied that Edith dies in childbirth. The next image is a boy standing in front of Edith's grave in the Finch cemetery at dawn. The point of view pulls back cinematically and pans the house and the rising sun, connoting a new beginning, perhaps a brighter one.

The mechanics throughout the game echo the tension between fondness and grief conveyed through the atmosphere. The frame story, that of Edith exploring the bedrooms in her childhood home, has similar mechanics to *Gone Home*: walking through the rooms —without running or jumping— and interacting with the objects around, inviting the player to make connections between the clues and the characters' stories. However, objects cannot be picked up for closer examination in *WRoEF* and there are very few notes to read. Instead, information is mostly conveyed through Edith's voiceover narration and the minigames triggered in each bedroom. These minigames bring a change of point of view, location, year and time of day with respect to Edith's. The player embodies the 1st person perspective of most of the deceased family members and relives with them the events leading up to their death. The mechanics of each minigame are personal to each character

despite the limited set of input options. For example, Walter can only open cans until he decides to walk away, Barbara can walk and hit with a crutch, and Calvin just swings himself back and forth on a tree swing. These minigames might convey vulnerability —not as an impending sense of threat by a scary enemy (except for Barabara's minigame)— but because of the invariability of fate. The player is looking into the past through the eyes of ghosts. However, at the moment of the minigame, these characters are alive again and have dreams, goals and worries. Inhabiting their perspective in their last minutes achieves closeness to their embodied experience. Their loss meaningful because the player got to know them. Mechanics and narrative structure replicate the mixed affect of fondness, longing and tragedy.

Throughout *WRoEF* there are atmospheric generators that coincide with those in *Gone Home*, such as darkness, inhospitable weather, overwhelming natural landscapes, and an unwieldly house-plan with hidden passages and secret rooms. Both games present elements in its atmosphere that evoke the gothic but none of them can be said to fully ascribe to this tradition. In *WRoEF*, the fear and helplessness associated with the gothic is tempered with atmospheric generators that inspire other affective states such as warmth, familiarity or sadness. The house is overdetermined with the presence of people that are gone —cluttered with a wealth of objects, pictures and mementos of family members spanning four generations. Loneliness is felt all the more starkly because of the palpable presence of so many others. However, *WRoEF* is affectively cohesive because the same emotional tone resonates through all dimensions: audiovisual atmosphere, storyline and mechanics. Balancing each other to retain the tension between helplessness and tenderness, all the design elements of this non-linear narrative follow a pattern parallel to that of affect as described by Massumi. Folding in on itself, melancholy music punctuating children's play areas, glitter dust punctuating darkness; each design element returning to the same set of emotions in different configurations, allowing them to resonate in the player.

Conclusion

The main goal of this article was to review Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres and apply it to the study of videogames. A precise definition of videogame atmospheres backed by Böhme's work on atmosphere ontology will hopefully allow for precision in future scholarly work on videogame aesthetics and videogame play experience. We could say that videogame aesthetic atmospheres encompass visual, aural and kinetic design from the perspective of emotional experience. *Videogame atmosphere* would then refer to the moods experienced by players as consequence of the audiovisual and movement design in the videogame's mediated space. These atmospheres continue to be a «'between'-phenomenon» (Böhme, 2017: 25), an intangible by-product of the encounter of subjects and objects in space. As such, we must be cautious when carrying out an analysis based on atmospheres.

As an effect of bodily, affective perception, studying atmospheres necessarily imply flexibility in the interpretation of the atmospheric generators. Since atmospheres do not have a concrete *meaning*, they are affectively infolded in a variety of ways by different bodies. Despite this margin of variability, Böhme can still argue that atmospheres can be intersubjective —two people can communicate and agree about the atmosphere in a given space— but this is more likely when these two people have comparable socio-cultural backgrounds. He writes, «an audience which is to experience a stage set in roughly the same way must have a certain homogeneity, that is to say, a certain mode of perception must have been instilled in it through cultural socialization» (2017: 30). This line brings up the importance of reading, viewing or playing practices part of the public's «mode of perception». While atmospheres are not a set of symbols, creators often rely on the established modes of media consumption to design their work. When it comes to videogames, one should not forget that playstyles and videogame literacy greatly impacts a players' experience of the game, and hence their perception of videogame atmosphere. Lacking familiarity with the controls already has a considerable impact on players' perception of the videogame, particularly of their capacity to move (Calleja, 2011: 71).

As a secondary goal, I considered the coordinated effect of a videogame atmosphere with other elements such as storyline or other mechanics in relation to Massumi's work on resonance. This point attempts to further the analysis of videogames as an integrated aesthetic experience through the lens of affect theory. *Gone Home* presented two different emotional tones: a gothic atmosphere that inspired vulnerability on the one hand, and on the other hand, the domestic drama and ironic twists on the gothic setting that undermined its sense of threat, grounding the videogame on a realistic environment. Arguably, affective resonance was not the goal of the designers but this interplay ultimately leads to some emotional distance between the player and the narrative. By contrast, *WRoEF* combines different tones —vulnerability and helplessness together with fondness and melancholy— but in a more integrated manner, with atmosphere, narrative and mechanics all conveying this tension. As a consequence, *WRoEF* arguably achieves greater emotional resonance as described by Brian Massumi through the close correlation between atmosphere, mechanics and narrative themes both conveying the same emotional message «on another level, in a different track» (1995: 87).

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