Interview: Steve Gaynor of The Fullbright Company

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I was lucky enough to grab half an hour with Steve Gaynor (Gone Home, BioShock 2, Minerva's Den) at this year's Fantastic Arcade in Austin, Texas. In that time, we talked about the challenges of believable level design, transitioning from large-scale game development in Boston to a three-

person team living in a house in Portland, and building a believable space for a player to piece a story together on their own.

Check out the full transcript of the interview after the break, or feel free to grab the raw (read: crappy) iPhone recording of our interview if you'd rather listen. Or, as always, you can subscribe on iTunes.

Interview with Steve Gaynor
Fantastic Arcade at Alamo Drafthouse Lakeline
September 21st, 2013

Me: Just to start off, one thing I've always been curious about is — where did the name "The Fullbright Company" come from? What's the history behind that?

Steve: It's a level design jargon term. Fullbright in a level editor means that basically you've turned off all the lighting in the level and made it so all the surfaces are 100% brightness so that you can see what's in the corners or what might be obscured by darkness or see if a texture is aligned or whatever. And it just seemed like a cool-sounding word.

So that was the name of my blog, and that started out as a sort of level-design progress journal. It continued as my blog and then it became my Twitter handle and everything. When we started to make the company we figured it had some name recognition and sounded nice so we used it for the company too.

Cool. It's kind of...kind of ironic when you look at Gone Home and how dark it is.

(Laughs) Yeah.

So if you wouldn't mind, can you give a 60-second rundown of your history of going from making levels to working on Minerva's Den and [BioShock] Infinite up to now?

I started making my own levels for F.E.A.R. and then I started working on an expansion pack called F.E.A.R.: Perseus Mandate. My first job was at TimeGate Studios in Texas. After I shipped that I started working on BioShock 2 at 2K Marin and was a level designer on that, and then was the lead and the writer of the DLC [Minerva's Den].

And then after I finished that I went to Boston to work on BioShock Infinite at Irrational. I worked on that for a year, and then I left that project to start The Fullbright Company and we started working on Gone Home.

Minerva's Den was a self-contained single-player episode within the world of BioShock 2 developed by members of The Fullbright Company

Cool. So — it's interesting. So you've always worked with first-person design, then.

Yeah.

Is that by preference or is that just sort of where things led you?

I guess — I mean, they work together. Like, I started making levels for F.E.A.R. because I wanted to work in that space that's high-fidelity and has, like, voice and immersive environments and allows you to tell a story in this sensorily complete way. When you start out you choose a level editor and at least for me it was based on what sort of thing I wanted to make with it. It's not like, "oh, Unreal is the most commonly used editor so I should use that." It's more that I liked F.E.A.R. a lot and they released their full suite of dev tools so you could make — any content that they could make you could make with their tools, so I was like, "all right, I want to make single-player campaign experiences so I'll use that."

I got hired in Texas because they were making F.E.A.R. content and they needed somebody who knew how to make F.E.A.R. levels and I had a portfolio that had F.E.A.R. levels in it, so it was a good match.

And then from there — I was a huge fan of BioShock, and stuff becomes kind of a positive feedback loop of "you made first-person stuff so you have experience — you've shown you have the ability to

do it so you can get hired doing that thing so blah blah blah…"

I dunno. I like a lot of games that are third-person games or various kinds of perspectives or engines, so it's not like — I don't think that first-person is inherently superior or anything…but it has allowed me to work on the kind of stuff I want to work on.

Gone Home came out a few months ago. I think you guys had been developing it for about what, like a year and a half or so?

Yep.

So that's got to be a big relief in some ways.

Yeah.

How's it been overall? How's the reception been in terms of your expectations?

It's been really good. We worked on it for a year and a half, which, for a full game from start to finish is not really long — I mean, I guess it depends on what kind of game it is. For some games it'd be a really long time but for the kind of game that Gone Home is it's a pretty good amount of time to spend — not, like, a crazy amount. I'm glad that we got it done in the amount of time that we did. My estimate at the beginning was that it'd take about a year and a half and it took actually just a little bit shorter than that, which is good.

But yeah, it's good to have it out there and have people playing it and have people responding to it. Reviews were really strong and we got some really high ones from outlets that [it was] cool to see they were excited about it. And sales have been good, so…yeah, I don't have anything to complain about, really.

That's awesome.

We wanted to make something that was what we wanted to make and that people would like and that would actually sell so we could make another game and we didn't have to make any real compromises when we were building the game — like, it was the thing that we wanted it to be and people are, y'know, connecting with it, so it's good.

Cool. So, in terms of how the finished game turned out compared to your expectations, do you feel like you made the game you wanted to make, or is there anything you wish you could've done differently?

There's nothing huge; just qualitatively, I feel like the mom's story is the least interesting or the least fleshed-out out of the stories in the game and I wish I had been able to do a little more work there to make her more compelling.

Did you experiment with putting more story elements in for her and just found they didn't fit? Or was it just when it came together you realized it wasn't —

I mean, we talked about it and had some ideas, but at the end of the day I think it's…so one of the constraining factors is how much space we had in the house because at some point everything that you have takes up a little bit of, at least, conceptual space. So I think that — none of the characters would I have wanted to do a whole lot more with. I think I could've had one or two more things about Mom that would've either deepened her backstory or added something on the end or something to just make her more complete-feeling.

I don't think it's a bad thing [or a] complete failure or anything, but I do feel like I could've gotten Mom a bit further and I would've been happy with that. But on the other hand, I don't feel like it was all ruined or anything. It's just, I think I could've added a bit more complexity to that part of the game, but as it stands it doesn't make me…I don't know what I would do with it, exactly, when I think about it, but at this point I think I could put a bit more time and thought into it and be like "oh yeah, this would've made her background a little more interesting" or whatever.

But aside from that, I'm really happy with everything else in the game. I'm sure the artists all feel like they could've spent an infinite amount of time adding more stuff to the game — more detail and everything — and on some level, theoretically, that would make the game better. But on the other hand, because of the kind of game it is you don't necessarily want it to be as incredibly dense as a real family's house is just because at some point it becomes really hard to tell what's significant and tell whether you've actually searched everything.

You don't want it to feel like a hoarder's house or anything.

Yeah. Like, if you look at a real person's house there's a lot more crap in it than in the house in Gone Home. We weren't trying to make a 1:1 simulation that perfectly duplicated exactly what it would be like to be in this house because — between the interactive constraints of how you actually search through stuff and just the raw density of assets and rendering and all that kind of stuff.

Our intent was to give the impression of being in the house and make it feel believable and let the player fill in the gaps that all the details and clutter we left out would normally be, so… I don't think

that even the artists would even feel like "I wish we had six more months because I wanted to [add] all this stuff to the game." I think we all feel pretty happy with where it ended up.

Yeah. When I was playing it I felt like there's enough detail in every — shot, I guess? — in every viewpoint. There were no spaces where I was confused by, y'know — [like] this feels like I'm missing something.

The TV room in Gone Home

But it's interesting, though, when you look at the layout of the house — there may be a house that actually looks like that somewhere but…I was aware playing it that this wasn't an actual, physical house that exists, but it had the feeling of being in a house in the 1990s and this is where these people live, these are their bedrooms…was it difficult to get that balance right, making it feel like a place that people lived in?

Yeah… (Pause) Well, part of it is the difference between the macro layout — when you look at the map and see where everything is related to one another — versus being in a single room and finding that room believable.

I think that, in aggregate, it's a lot more important to believe in everything that's in the space that you can currently see — kind of like your immediate awareness — if that reads as "yeah, this is a room that someone actually lived in" or "this is the hallway of a house and it makes sense to me that the bathroom would be at the far end of the hall" and so on. That is way more important to a player's suspension of disbelief and overall acceptance of the experience than the layout being a

perfectly rational blueprint that could actually be constructed just because…you can look at it in the abstract, you can be like "it's weird that it's this shape" but you can't really extrapolate well beyond the space that you're currently in.

And so yeah, I concentrated more on making sure that the layout of the house facilitated the player's flow as they explored to discover things in a fairly reliable order and to make it clear that "oh, I've been here and not here" and that kind of stuff, and conversely to focus on making every room and every individual space that the player could occupy feel authentic and that the in-between of "but the house could never actually be constructed as a house" is a lot less important unless you're really looking at it like an architect and trying to analyze how would this be built if we put it in reality.

Just out of curiosity, when you guys were developing the game, at about what time did you finalize the final room layout of the house? Did you have pieces that were moving around still or did you kind of have that laid out?

For the most part, I got the broad layout done early because we built the game in two halves. We built up to [the point of] opening Sam's locker in her room as a self-contained — that was the thing that we entered into the IGF (Independent Games Festival) — so it was like the first hour of gameplay, give or take. We built that first and got it up to, like, a beta level of finish — we got the voice recording into it and all the visual detail, etc. — because that was our first big milestone. We wanted to put this in the IGF and be nominated and so we wanted to make something polished and self-contained that feels complete so you can get an idea of what the full game will be like.

After that we moved on to making the second half, and similarly I worked on the layout of that for a while. And I worked with Kate [Craig] on the layout of that because she did a lot of research into the architecture of houses from that era. But in both cases there were small updates and tweaks and more minor alterations going on throughout the process. Like…well, especially in the first half of the house, for a long time I was altering the proportions of the spaces because when I built them empty they were really big because we don't have a lot of frame of reference. So like the TV room was just all huge and cavernous. And then you start putting stuff in it and you're like "oh, this is way too big" because you have that perspective on "oh, a couch is only that big so this room's way too huge" and stuff like that. So I was working on the proportions and the feel of the architecture for a while, but the broad layout — like where each room was in relationship to every other — stayed the same.

And similarly, in the east hall, we had had it so the hall wrapped around and went into the garage

on the very far-east side of the house, and at some point we were like "okay, we need to chop off the hall earlier and just pull it in" and make more dead-ends instead of big loops. But it was an alteration of the existing layout; it wasn't like "oh, I think the kitchen needs to be on the other side of the house" or anything like that.

Gotcha. That makes sense.

So one thing I was wondering about: how did the core concept of this game originate? Because from my point of view, you worked on BioShock 2 and Minerva and Infinite and those are all very story-driven games with setpieces and things you walk into with bits of story but there [are] also these big combat arenas.

Yeah.

> "A subset of the games we've worked on that inspire us is environmental storytelling, like exploring to find audio diaries and so on. And it was at that point that we were like 'well, that sounds like something we want to build.'

So had you always wanted to make a combat-free game and did the narrative follow that, or what was the kind of process there?

Not explicitly. It was more that we started the company with three people and we brought Kate on as our fourth not too long after we started, but we were…four people and we also knew that we wanted to make a game that played off of our experience and played to our strengths and that we had confidence in being able to build because it was like stuff we had made before. But also, with the people we had it wasn't like we could even put enemies in if we had wanted to, you know?

Sure.

And so it became a question of "how do we make something that is like what we've made before or builds off of our skills that we already have but also make it something that we can construct and something that we can be interested in making?"…

A subset of the games we've worked on that inspire us is the environmental storytelling style of stuff, like exploring to find audio diaries, and so on and so forth. And it was at that point that we were like "well, that sounds like something we could build and we want to build" and then the question of "so what story are we telling, or what is the setting, or what is the time period it takes place in?" and all the specifics came after we had said "if we take our resume and then pare back everything except exploration and finding stuff and putting the story together in your head, what does that lead to?"

One thing I was wondering when I played the game — obviously this game came from a four-person team so there have to be constraints — were there any types of narrative devices you had thought about using that wouldn't have made sense with a smaller team? …Obviously there are no people in the house [and] that's probably by design, but were there any other things that you considered wanting to do but scrapped early because the resource cost would be too intensive?

We talked about the potential of having audio diaries for other members of the family or having audio diaries that had multiple characters in them, like a conversation between two characters that was in the form of an audio diary. And both for practical reasons of having to cast and record multiple actors being expensive and time-consuming and hard to get right and just the fact that as we were working on it that just tonally and for what we wanted to do that having Sam's experience be spoken in her own words and for that to be her individual perspective was really what we wanted to do and just to focus on that and keep it. So everything else in the house is literally what you find in the house, but Sam is the person who you hear the personal side from.

So yeah, we talked about that stuff for a little bit and…we realized that, for various reasons, it wasn't something that we wanted to expand the scope of.

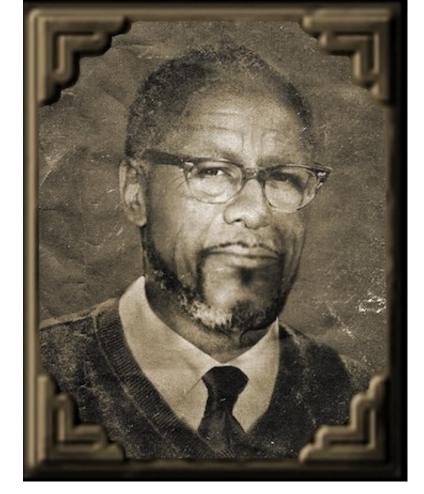**Speaking of Sam — I assume you were involved in casting her?**

Yeah.

Was that your first time casting people?

No — Karla [Zimonja] and I cast Porter for Minerva's Den. The actor, Carl Lumbly, was recommended to us by the creative director of BioShock 2…He's a TV actor mostly and had been in some movies.

But yeah, the creative director of the main game suggested we look him up so we watched some

stuff that he was in and said "yeah, that does seem really good." Luckily he was available. And then I went down to LA and did the voice direction for him, and that was good. Doing voice direction in person is really important because you actually make eye contact and so on and so forth…

From that we knew that we wanted to direct the voice actor for Gone Home in-person as well, so we worked with a local voice-casting agency in Portland to find someone who was based in Portland so we could get in the same room with them and record. And we found Sarah Grayson who was the voice of Sam, and we were really lucky and really happy to have gotten to work with her because she's super good.

Charles Milton Porter (portrayed by Carl Lumbly), the main character of Minerva's Den

Did you do all the dialogue and note-writing as well?

Yeah.

So what is that — I guess I'm curious. It seems like level design and actually writing dialogue are very different disciplines. How'd you get involved with writing? Have you written stories previous to making games?

I had — when I was growing up I wrote comics and stuff…and then when I was in college I wrote a zine. And when I got out of college I transitioned that into writing my blog. And so then when I was working on BioShock 2 they were writing the game and they had a lot of written content to get done. And I told them "hey, if you need more coverage for writing audio diaries or enemy barks or anything, let me know."

And so at the end of development when stuff was getting serious, they did need more coverage and I was in the building so they were like "you said you wanted to do this — try writing some stuff

and we'll see if it works." So I ended up writing some audio diaries and some enemy lines and a bunch of the supplemental text. Like if you look in the in-game encyclopedia and read about the different kinds of food and stuff like that…

And so then when we were finishing the game and we knew that we were gonna do single-player DLC, I had a pitch and showed that I was interested and said "hey, here's the story that I wanna do." And since I'd done some writing in the main game and I was there and wanted to work on it, they let me take that, and so I was the writer of everything in Minerva.

And then yeah, [I] went from there to — I mean, my main job was writing at Irrational, but it was all writing design documents — so pitching what was going to happen in the levels and stuff like that. None of the — it was all Ken [Levine] doing the — well, not all Ken; he had another writer that he worked with. But anyway, I wasn't involved with any of the actual [things] that went on-screen or the things that you heard in Infinite, but it was most of my job to write up design docs and then pitch them to Ken. And once he was cool with something I would then work with the level artist to do the first prototype on some of the levels. But yeah, getting into Gone Home was getting back into actually writing dialogue and prose and so on and so forth and it going on-screen in the finished product.

Is that something you really wanted to get back to at that point?

Yeah. I mean, it's like…if we're gonna make a story game, y'know, it's two sides of the same coin where we made a story game because I was interested in doing story stuff and we could make a story game because there was somebody on the team who could produce that content. So it worked out. But Karla is my story partner on the game and she was on Minerva's Den as well, and we worked together figuring out what the plot and events of the story are and the character details and stuff. And then yeah, I write the actual words that end up on the notes or that the characters say.

You probably get a lot of questions about this so I won't spend too much time on it, but just in general — you spent a lot of years in what we'd call "triple-A", y'know, working at 2K, Irrational, etc. A lot of people have different reasons for moving to indie — you rarely hear people ever going from indie back to AAA — so would you mind talking a little bit about what led you to want to make that jump? Would you ever want to go back to AAA?

For me, it was [that] I had worked on a really big team on BioShock 2 and then I worked on a small team on the DLC — it was like a dozen people on the DLC — and I went back to an even bigger

team on Infinite. Just going through that whole process made me realize that I wanted to work on smaller games and I wanted to work on games that weren't so constrained by genre requirements — all the things that come along with "oh, we have to sell 10 million copies to be a success." And I wouldn't want to go back to working in AAA on a day-to-day basis, y'know, like become an employee of a AAA studio or anything.

Sure.

It could be cool to do some collaboration or something. I don't even know what that would look like, but as it is I want to keep working in the capacity I am on the stuff we are doing and continue to expand on that and explore it going forward.

For sure. I think it makes a lot of sense. Completely unrelated, but one thing I always thought would be really cool is if a company like Telltale or something did an episodic series but, like a lot of TV shows do, bring in different directors and writers to help make those episodes in the series.

Yeah. Yeah, I think that would be fun.

As far as I can tell, you guys are probably the biggest developer in Portland, or at least one of them, if you don't count asset development like Liquid or something like that.

I mean, right now we're probably getting the most attention, I guess. But yeah, there isn't a big development scene in Portland.

Has that been a big challenge for you guys? Or do you like just having that sort of lifestyle?

No, it's cool. I wanted to go back to Portland just because that's where I wanted to live and I'm glad that we could start a studio there. And being in Portland allowed us to start a studio because the cost of living is low enough that we could actually afford to make the game we wanted to make without having to have investors or anything else. So that's all been really good, and quality of life is just really high. We're in a nice neighborhood and you can walk to everywhere and it's just been good for the development process.

Quality of life is huge.

Yeah. I mean, I don't have a commute. It sort of splits the difference between working from home and working in an office because we all moved into a house together to make the game and our office is in the basement. So it's like, we have dedicated working space so it's not like you're just

working in your bedroom, but also our commute is a flight of stairs so you can very easily say "ok, I need to take a break" and then if you wanna get something done at 11 at night you can just walk downstairs and get it done and then go to bed and not have to worry about "oh, it's a 45-minute train ride to get to the office and it stops running at midnight…"

> "I wanted to go back to Portland because that's where I wanted to live. And being in Portland allowed us to start a studio because the cost of living is low enough that we could actually afford to make the game we wanted to make."

I don't think we're gonna maintain that in the long term. I think we're still gonna have a small office space and then I'm gonna try to live near it so it's still not super onerous to get to the office and get something done and get home easily. But I hope, if anything, that we're able to slowly expand the studio and bring on a few more people and expand the scope of the games that we make in ways that are smart and [don't] make us too big so we become unsustainable and all the problems you can run into when you're starting a studio…but [to] just get to the point where we can have more talented people working on games in Portland and hopefully start to be part of a bigger game development scene that can actually exist there and be self-sustaining. I think it would be great for talented game developers to be able to live in Portland and work on a project at a studio with other people.

Because, you know, I was moving back to Portland and I was like "it's literally not possible for me to just…get a job making games there." Especially not making the kinds of games that I actually wanted to make or was good at. And so if that could be different on some level in Portland I think that would be really cool.

I mean, I totally agree. I've always felt like it was one of those cities that would be perfect for — especially for small-scale development — but it's super challenging if you're looking for a bigger company.

Yeah. And it hasn't had the — like, San Francisco and Seattle and LA all have big development scenes because of the movie industry and LucasArts and Apple and because of Microsoft, you

know? Like they have all these big companies that employ creative, technical people that they can split off and start their own studio. And Portland has never really had that.

In my career, I've had to leave and spend a bunch of years gathering expertise and making connections outside of Portland so that I could bring some of that back there in an intentional way. But hopefully that can be something that is one of the starting points of a community that can become a self-sustaining industry there.

That's what Austin has been like, right? Like there was Origin here and then Origin led to a bunch of satellite studios of people who had come to Austin to work at Origin and they outgrew it and started their own thing, and then there was this community of studios — like, this constellation of studios around the city — and that's really cool.

It's kind of ebbed and flowed a bit, but Arkane's still here and there's still some cool stuff happening.

Just out of curiosity, what have you seen here [at Fantastic Arcade] that you like so far?

I need to play Samurai Gunn but it looks really cool. And I heard about No Brakes Valet for the first time just seeing it on the show floor and I want to try that out, and I need to try the Choosatron — it seems really interesting to play with.

(…Some more stuff about Fantastic Arcade and conversational chatting omitted here for brevity…)

Good talking with you, man.

Thanks a lot!

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