

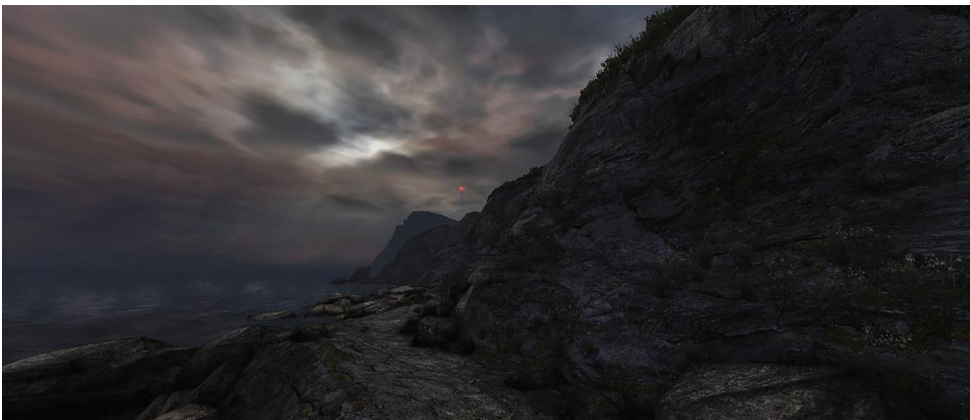
Dear Esther - Anti-interactive catharsis

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There is probably no other type of art-entertainment medium if we consider media such as books, comics, or film, which contains as many interactive-narrative segments as the medium of the video game. From the most primitive games like Tetris to the latest and most acclaimed like *Cyberpunk 2077*, interactivity is one of the key aspects that separates video games from other media. Among other things, this is the reason why throughout the historical development of video games, the main focus has been on developing as complex, intelligent, and fun types of interactivity as possible, culminating in today's technological breakthroughs in the realms of virtual reality. With that in mind, it's pretty bizarre and at the same time extremely brave when a video game company decides to release a product that treats interaction as its worst enemy, in a kind of golden age of video games where titles like *World Of Warcraft* and *Half-Life 2* ruled. A good part of video game connoisseurs would agree with the previous sentiment and would most likely look at you with a pale expression at first, possibly shower you with the most poisonous bile they are known to be capable of while you try to explain to them about a game where you do nothing literally but take your protagonist to the point A to point B. Therefore, it is even more bizarre when this company, with the mentioned game, experienced planetary success, created a new genre of video games out of nothing, mockingly called *Walking Simulator*. This name was accepted by the creators of the genre with a dose of self-parody and irony, radically changed the perception of video games as a medium, and, in the author's opinion, established video games as

a superior medium of pure art. The company in question is thechineserom, and the game is Dear Esther.

And what the hell is actually Dear Esther? As the famous, now sadly deceased, Youtube critic Total Biscuit once asked, who shared his perplexing experience of playing to his audience and at the very beginning said extremely pejoratively that Dear Esther is simply not a video game. How can you conjure up this game for many people who still have a pejorative view of all video games today? Starting with the plot itself, on the first experience, we may not come across anything particularly spectacular. The player enters the skin of a protagonist who, with a broken heart and rapidly detrimental health, wanders a seemingly deserted island in the Scottish Hebrides, remembering his late beloved wife Esther, who tragically died in a car accident, where he incidentally describes his surroundings, occasionally commenting on the history of the island and the occasional resident he has heard of. From the perspective of a player deprived of even the minimum standard exposure. There is no clear goal in the game, except that he may soon conclude that the radio tower on a remote hill, which stands out with its red signal light in a bluish-purple hebridic twilight, implies the goal to be reached.



Such a synopsis would not be particularly appealing to a film lover, except perhaps a keen fan of indie art, but especially for video games, it seems like the worst blasphemy, as the vast majority of players are accustomed to handling deadly weapons by massacring hordes of enemies, participating in grand political-criminal intrigues or maneuvering armies, and thus be saturated with dopamine and adrenaline, even with the very anticipation of such events. Objectively speaking, what would be more interesting for the average player to participate? In an epic resistance attack on the Citadel in City 17, as the beginning of the overthrow of an inter-dimensional organization that conquered the whole Earth, or to experience the sad, nameless middle-aged man wandering equally anonymous and even more mournful island?

There are several reasons why the creators of Dear Esther created a masterpiece from the anti-exposition, as mentioned earlier, which is still enjoyed and bought today. From the offset, it is easiest to describe that the game is graphically indescribably beautiful, from the perfect play of light and shadow, an incredibly detailed landscape that graphic artist Robert Briscoe further made alive and organic with many small and highly elaborate details with the successfully reached goal of making the landscape tell at least half the story. It must be emphasized that the game looks terrific by today's standards, even though almost 10 years have passed since its release, which is in itself an incredible success when we consider the highly dynamic nature of graphics development in general in video games. Dear Esther's soundtrack is also so high quality that it can be easily listened to and enjoyed without ever running the game. An extensive range of compositions ranging from extremely melancholic and sparse piano preludes, through epic, multi-instrumental symphonic poems, to abstract, distorted atonal sounds

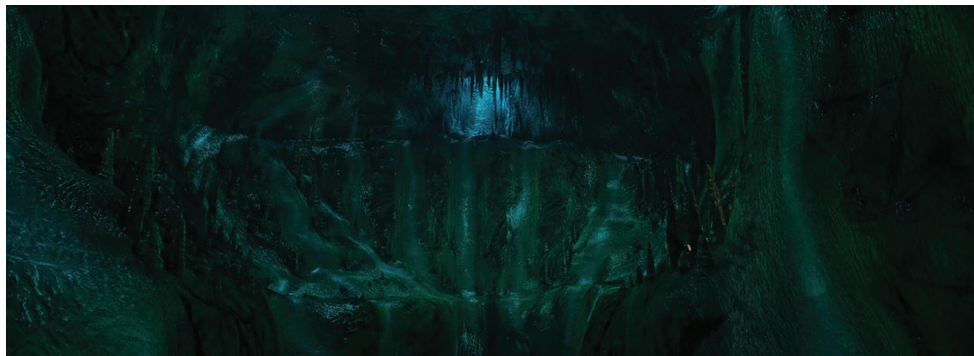
and voices. The soundtrack is joined by equally beautiful sounds of nature, from the rustling of the wind through the rare plants of the island to the pounding of the waves along the rocky Hebrides coast that seem like a constant chordal accompaniment that is sometimes difficult to distinguish between music and nature. Jessica Curry proved how important music is for the quality of a video game and how different music becomes through the medium of the video game, almost as non-sequential as the medium itself. From the release date of *Dear Esther*, from today's foreign perspective back in 2012, it didn't take long for *Dear Esther* to pick up awards like the ones at the TIGA Games Industry Awards 2012 because of the two geniuses mentioned. The game won the "Originality Award" together with awards for "Best Action / Adventure Game," "Best Visual Design," "Best Audio Design," and "Best Debut Game." The game was nominated for five awards at the 9th British Video Video Games Awards.

The aforementioned segments drawn from the overall context, however wonderful, are not in themselves the reason for *Dear Esther*'s success. The leading mind and creative director of the *thechineseroom*, Dan Pinchbeck, enters the stage decisively, whose poetic gift for words is at the level of previous geniuses and thus creates a monologue diagram on the border of poetry and prose, and with his vision successfully shapes the plot and course of the game that successfully connects man, music, and landscape. Dan Pinchbeck was among the first to describe in detail and notice the phenomenon of sense of presence in games, perceived from the very beginning of the medium, and through *Dear Esther*, he decided to express this phenomenon to the end, isolating it from various interactivity mechanics borrowed from other mediums, which are inherently antagonistic towards videogames. Through a plot divid-

ed into four chapters (named after the most recognizable landmarks in the landscape in the given chapters; lighthouse, buoy, caves, and aerial), the player witnesses a slow change of landscape accompanied by a change in the general perception of reality, where the increasingly frequent scenes of stranded ships and long-forgotten lighthouses and buoys give a somewhat sinister contrast to the virgin nature of the Hebrides where the protagonist himself partially describes them as tumor metastases on healthy tissue. The protagonist himself wonders, along with the player, whether the island is real or the fruit of his dying mind, or perhaps he has already died and is in a personalized purgatory, and maybe hell? The game is deliberately stingy with the absolute truth of the story, which is most directly presented to the player through the monologues of the protagonists, which are not always the same and requires a substantial number of playthroughs from start to finish for the player to hear all the monologues and potentially construct a story from it. As the player progresses in the game, the symbolism gradually grows, and more and more unusual things are encountered, such as the chemical formula of alcohol and diagrams of internal combustion engines obturated by caves, inaccessible gorges, stacked of pebbles, or drawn in the sand on the beach. In front of the entrance to the deep caverns of the island as if reality is slowly dissolving, while the shadows of twilight seem to take human forms while some places in gorges where you would expect to find algae and stones, we find unusual books and something that looks like an ultrasound image of the womb, which additionally emphasizes the tragedy of Esther's death. The island looks more and more like a sanctuary, while candles and street shrines appear very similar to those in our region; when we mark the place of death in traffic accidents with candles, only in addition to pictures of the deceased here, we witness car bodies and long used defibrillators. As we ap-

proach the cave, the atmosphere, noises, and music become more and more distorted, and we feel as if we are preparing to descend into the long-forgotten portals of the afterlife.

The caves in the game, whether they symbolize the protagonist's journey into the farthest recesses of one's own soul in search of deliverance or oblivion, or are mere caves of one island of Scottish backwater, are genuinely another world. Rare island flowers and plants swaying in the wind are replaced by eons of motionless stalagmites and the dark expanse filled with animal and ship corpses of the Atlantic Ocean, rushing streams of pristine water. In the author's humble opinion, we experience the visual climax of the whole game, and the next frame I present exudes such timeless beauty that the author, like many other players, returned to the third chapter of the game just to wander inside the island. Words, even pictures, cannot fully convey this. Seeking his way out and the way to the interior of the island, crippled by fractures, feverish with infections, stunned and delirium from an overdose of diazepam and paracetamol, the protagonist finally finds his inner peace and purity of mind, but also the strength of heart by forgiving the involuntary killer of his late wife and forgiving himself. Eventually, he becomes ready to gracefully and stoically accept the fate he has charted on top of the aerial that has been calling to him since descending the island.



In addition to being narratively explained throughout the chapter, it is accompanied by strong Christian symbolism of frequent immersion and ascent from pools and streams of pristine water while strongly alluding to the rite of baptism and the act of resurrection. Of course, this is not the only example of the strong Christian symbolism that abounds in the game. In the gorges, in addition to the chemical formulas of alcohol and engine diagrams, quotations from the Bible are also equally often written, most often according to Matthew. Even the previously mentioned shrines dedicated to traffic accidents are not the only religious motif, the creators of the game hide Christian symbolism on the landscape and shipwrecks that can only be recognized by looking through a specific position.



In addition to visual and narrative transformation, we also experience auditory transformation in caves; instrumental music is increasingly being replaced by vocal music in the form of a female singing voice as if Esther herself is trying to comfort the insoluble protagonist.



Meanwhile, distorted female sobs and incomprehensible words appear through the soundtrack, symbolizing mutual suffering and longing, as much as the protagonist wants to bring Esther back, the love they shared is so strong that it seems that Esther herself wants to break the boundary of the worlds and return to the protagonist, symbolizing that even death cannot ultimately separate them. Jessica Curry's music is so saturated with Esther's leitmotif, that a careful erudite may notice that the rhythm and melody of a particular composition is actually Morse's code name Esther. Ultimately both the ocean and all the sounds are Esther and our nameless protagonist, the music is their sobs, and the ocean is their tears. The island is Esther's body, figuratively but also literally, as a careful observer may notice when, like Lazarus, he rises from a cave and comes to a beach lit by the full moon and a legion of lighted candles, how the hill on which the aerial stands indeed resembles the body of a woman lying on her side. Eventually, the protagonist, like Jesus on Golgotha, begins the final ascent to the top of the hill and to the red light at the top of the aerial, accompanied by a hellish fugue of stormy wind and unbridled orchestra

and choir, to which his inner catharsis defiantly stands as a dissonant counterpoint. At the top, he finally experiences his liberation, which I will not reveal on this occasion, just as I have not exposed many other unforgettable moments, which I leave to potential future individuals, for whom I hope to experience Dear Esther one day, which I hope this written text may encourage. As can obviously be noticed, this is more of a love letter addressed to the game than its review.