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**Narrative in the game Dear Esther through the lenses of Reader-
Response theory**

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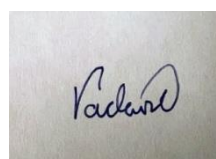
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Čestné prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma „Narrative in the game Dear Esther through the lenses of Reader-Response theory“ vypracoval samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedl jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne 10.5.2023

Podpis

A rectangular area containing a handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Richard'.

From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank my supervisor Mgr. Ph.D. Elizabeth Allyn Woock for the support I received. Doctor Woock made sure that every time I sought help with anything her doors were always open, and her supportive documents were for my work invaluable.

Obsah

1	Introduction	1
2	World of Games	3
2.1	Genre of the Games	5
3	Narrative in Games.....	7
3.1	Two thoughts	8
3.2	Ludology.....	11
3.2.1	Espen Aarseth.....	11
3.2.2	Jesper Jull	15
3.2.3	Ludologic Approach.....	17
3.3	Narratology.....	19
3.3.1	Marie-Laure Ryan	20
4	Introduction of the game Dear Esther	23
4.1	The main characters	24
4.2	Theme of the game	25
4.3	Symbols	27
4.3.1	Lighthouse	27
4.3.2	Darkness	28
4.3.3	Cave.....	29
4.3.4	Bird.....	31
4.3.5	Island	32
4.4	Type of the narrator	33
4.5	The Space of the narrative	34
5	Ludology and the Narratology	35
6	Reader-response theory	36
6.1	Wolfgang Iser	36
6.1.1	The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett.....	36
6.2	Stanley Fish	37
6.2.1	Is There a Text in This Class?.....	38
6.3	Reader response theory and Dear Esther	39
6.3.1	Implied reader	39
6.3.2	The “gap”	39
6.3.3	Symbolism and Reader response.....	40

6.3.4	Subjectivity in Dear Esther	41
6.3.5	Active Participation in Dear Esther.....	41
7	Conclusion of the thesis	43
8	Bibliography.....	46
9	annotation	49

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the popularity of video games has increased tremendously. However, narrative in games is still considered by many as a mere background element of the gameplay. This bachelor thesis aims to argue against this perspective and to prove that game narratives should be taken more seriously by modernizing literary analyses.

The primary goal of the first section of this bachelor's thesis is to familiarize the readers with the world of games and their various subgenres. Given how big the gaming industry is and how many different genres there are, there must be some background information given. It will also give a general overview of the most common game genres, including simulation, role-playing, action, and adventure. The purpose of this chapter is to make sure that even readers who are not familiar with the gaming industry can understand and follow the main arguments and ideas of the thesis.

The concept of narrative in games will be covered in more detail in the second section of the thesis. A brief overview of the significance of narrative in games, in general, will be given at the beginning of the section. The section will then concentrate on the two academic communities that have been researching the function of narrative in video games, namely Ludologists, and Narratologists. Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul, two prominent academics who represent the ludologists, contend that the main goal of games is to entertain players. They think that while the narrative is significant in some ways, the player's experience comes first. The article will go into detail about their theories and how they differ from the Narratologists' theories. Contrarily narratologists assert that while both the player experience and narrative are significant, they place a greater emphasis on the former. Marie Ryan, a well-known academic in this group, makes the case that literary theory and analyses need to be updated to take game narrative into account. In-depth explanations of Ryan's theories and how they support the contention that game narratives ought to be given more consideration are provided in this section.

As the primary source of this research, the third section of this thesis will concentrate on analyzing the story-driven video game *Dear Esther*. This section will offer a thorough analysis of the game's narrative, including the main character, themes, and symbolism employed throughout. The game's use of the player's experience to enhance the story and produce a distinctive and immersive storytelling experience will also be examined. As a practical illustration of the value of narrative in video games and how it can be examined using

literary theory and analysis, *Dear Esther* will be examined. It will show that narratives in video games can be as complex and rich as those in traditional literature, making them worthwhile for study and analysis.

The fourth section of this thesis will draw on the ideas of both Ludologists and Narratologists, examining the ways in which the game *Dear Esther* provides a powerful narrative. The article will also explore how the game's narrative compares to its literary counterparts.

In the final section by focusing on the reader's role in interpreting and deriving meaning from a literary work, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish seeks to better understand how readers respond to literature. This theory contends that a reader constantly constructs and reconfigures the meaning of a text, rather than it being a fixed entity. That is to say, the impact the text has on the reader is just as significant as the text itself. Even though this theory was initially created for literary analysis, it can also be used for video games and other forms of media. The reader-response theory will be applied to the game *Dear Esther* in the thesis's final section. The article will look at how players' reactions to the game can affect how they view the story and its themes. This thesis aims to further illustrate the value and significance of viewing games as a form of narrative art that can be examined and studied by applying this theory to video games. It emphasizes the necessity of modernizing literary analyses to incorporate video games and lays the groundwork for further investigation in this field.

2 WORLD OF GAMES

The world of video games has evolved dramatically over the last several decades, from simple arcade games to complex and accurate virtual reality. People of all ages and levels of income are attracted to this rapidly expanding sector of the economy. Games have become a core element of entertainment, education, and even societal interaction in modern culture.

One of the biggest changes in the gaming industry has been the rise of online gaming. Since the internet's creation, anyone with internet access can play games. As a result, a worldwide gaming community has emerged where players from all over the world play together in virtual worlds. Another outcome of online games is the popularity of esports, in which professional gamers compete for sizeable financial rewards in organized competitions. The article *eSports market revenue worldwide from 2020 to 2025* by Statista provides valuable insights into the current state and growth of the global esports industry. According to the article:

In 2022, the global eSports market was valued at just over 1.38 billion U.S. dollars. Additionally, the eSports industry's global market revenue was forecast to grow to as much as 1.87 billion U.S. dollars in 2025. Asia and North America currently represent the largest eSports markets in terms of revenue, with China alone accounting for almost one fifth of the market.¹

A simulation of a real-world or fictional environment can be experienced by users thanks to a technology called virtual reality (VR). By using a headset or other device that blocks out the outside world and replaces it with a virtual one, it immerses the user in a computer-generated world. Users can interact with this virtual world in a way that feels natural and intuitive, giving them the impression that they are actually there. One of the most popular uses of VR is in gaming. VR headsets such as the Oculus Quest 2, PlayStation VR, and HTC Vive allow gamers to experience immersive gaming worlds, making them feel like they are really inside the game.

The gaming sector has not always been free of controversy. Video games with violent content have come under fire for encouraging aggression and exposing players to violence, according to some. Others have criticized the addictiveness of video games, saying that it can result in social isolation and other unfavorable effects. Numerous studies have suggested that playing violent video games may cause some people to become more aggressive in their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This is related to the possibility that violent video games and aggression are related. For example, a 2014 study published in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*

¹ Christina Gough, "Revenue of the global eSports market 2020-2025," Statista, September 22, 2022

found that children who played violent video games were more likely to display aggressive behavior than those who did not play such games.² However, other professionals have noted that the connection between aggressive behavior and violent video games is complex and poorly understood. For instance, a study from 2019 that appeared in the journal *Royal Society Open Science* suggested that a person's moral identity may act as a moderator in the relationship between violent video games and aggression, with those who strongly identify with moral values being less likely to act aggressively after playing violent video games.³ In terms of addiction, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized "gaming disorder" as a mental health condition in 2018. The disorder is characterized by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behavior that can lead to significant impairment or distress.⁴

In recent years, games have become an important part of people's daily lives all over the world. The article by Brian Dean is trying to collect information about activities tied to the platform Steam. The Valve Corporation created Steam, a digital distribution platform for video games. Users can buy, download, and play games on their computers thanks to this. It is one of the most well-known gaming platforms in the world, with a sizable user base and an enormous selection of games that can be bought there. In his article, Deans states that: "Since 2017, the number of monthly active Steam users has increased 1.79 times."⁵ Every year, the popular platform Steam displays charts with information on how many people use their platform and what kinds of games people play. According to Dean who collects these data in his article: "Steam has 120 million monthly active users, 62.6 million people use Steam on a daily basis, the Steam catalog in the US includes 50,361 games, Steam users logged 31.3 billion hours of playtime in 2020."⁶

According to these statistics, a sizable number of people play the games. A more accurate perspective would be that almost all French citizens would engage in daily gaming. Even academics began to be affected by the gaming industry's boom as they developed an

² David A. Gentile et al., "Mediators and Moderators of Long-term Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior: Practice, Thinking, and Action," *JAMA Pediatrics* 168, no. 5 (2014): 450–457, doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.63.

³ Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, "Violent Video Game Engagement Is Not Associated with Adolescents' Aggressive Behaviour: Evidence from a Registered Report," *Royal Society Open Science* 6, no. 2 (2019): p. 171474, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.171474>.

⁴ World Health Organization, "Gaming disorder," accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/gaming-disorder>.

⁵ Brian Dean, "Steam Users: A Comprehensive Guide to Statistics and Demographics," Backlinko, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://backlinko.com/steam-users>.

⁶ Dean, Steam Users: A Comprehensive Guide to Statistics and Demographics.

interest in games because of their technological features, such as their graphics and coding. What is more significant for this thesis, though, is that academics have begun to examine games from a literary perspective. This will demonstrate why the literature theories and analyses need to be updated, as will be shown in the sections that follow.

The statistics and the entire paragraphs above are included in this section to demonstrate how the gaming industry is expanding and likely outpacing the book industry. This should be considered since the study of games from the perspective of narratology is still relatively new but has already begun to offer fresh perspectives on literature analyses and theories. In the next section, there is a need to provide some information about the genre of the games and the similarity between the book's genres and games.

2.1 Genre of the Games

In recent years, video games have become an increasingly popular form of entertainment, and as the industry has grown, so have the various game genres available to players. There is a game for almost every taste, from action-packed shooters to immersive RPGs. It is crucial to describe video game genres because it enables both players and developers to fully understand the nature and characteristics of various game types. Every genre has its own distinctive traits, game mechanics, plots, and target audiences. Players can choose the kinds of games they want to play with more knowledge if different genres are defined and discussed, and game designers can better understand their audience's preferences and create games that respond to them. In addition, discussing genres in the context of game narrative is essential because it enables us to examine the various ways in which genres approach storytelling.

The concept of video game genres and their development over time are covered in the article *Video Game Genre, Evolution, and Innovation* by Dominic Arsenault. According to Arsenault, genres are dynamic categories that constantly change and evolve as new games and technologies are developed. The article explores the evolution of various game genres, including role-playing, simulation, action, and adventure games. In addition, Arsenault discusses how the idea of the genre can be applied to research the origins and evolution of video games as well as to guide the development of new ones.⁷ As this article states the genres of

⁷Dominic Arsenault, "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): pp. 149-176, <https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6003>.

games are still developing as technology progress, however, there are some basic distinctions between them.

Role-playing games (RPGs) place a higher value on immersive world-building and character development than first-person shooters (FPS), which prioritize fast-paced action and exciting set pieces. The ability to appreciate the unique narrative experiences that various genres can offer depends on the ability to comprehend these variations in storytelling techniques.

Understanding *Dear Esther's* genre is essential for comprehending and evaluating its storytelling technique. The game *Dear Esther* is an illustration of a category known as “walking simulators,” which places an emphasis on immersion in the game’s world and exploration while restricting player interaction with it. Narrative strategy used in this genre frequently relies on environmental storytelling, which tells the story through the game’s setting rather than through dialogue or cutscenes. Knowing *Dear Esther's* specific genre enables a deeper analysis of the narrative strategies used in the game and how they impact the player’s experience. To emphasize the player’s emotional reaction to the story rather than their freedom within the game world, the game heavily relies on environmental storytelling and exploration, which adds to its immersive, atmospheric tone. Therefore, understanding the genre of *Dear Esther* provides context for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of its narrative.

Since the gaming world is extremely complex, section 2 served as an introduction to it. Without this knowledge, it would be challenging to move on to section 3, which will discuss a game narrative.

3 NARRATIVE IN GAMES

When talking about video games, the terms narrative, story, plot, and structure are frequently used interchangeably, but they refer to different ideas. A story is a series of incidents that are told in a specific order. The basic order of events is what gives a narrative its structure. The way the audience is introduced to the story is called the plot. It is a narrative's structure, including the chronological order of events and the character interactions. The plot's structure, which includes how the events are ordered and how the characters are introduced, is referred to as its structure.

Whereas the concept of narrative is broader and includes each of these components. The plot, structure, characters, and any other aspects that add to the enjoyment of the story are all included in how the story is presented to the audience. In other words, narrative refers to the method of telling a story. Video games' narratives are a crucial element that can enhance the overall gaming experience. A compelling narrative can draw players deeper into the game's world and give them a reason to keep playing. In recent years, narratives that give players choices and outcomes throughout the game have received more attention from game developers.

One of the earliest examples of narrative in video games can be found in text-based adventure games from the 1970s and 1980s. These games relied heavily on player decisions and written descriptions to tell a compelling story. Technology advancements allowed game designers to employ more complex graphics and audio, which allowed for more immersive storytelling. Due to its intricate and captivating plot, *Final Fantasy VII*, a video game that was released in 1997, is regarded as a landmark in the industry. The game has a large cast of characters from different backgrounds and with different personalities, all of whom have their own motivations and objectives. Players experience emotional moments and plot twists as they advance through the game, which deepens narrative and gives the characters a more believable and relatable feel.⁸

To create immersive and compelling storylines that would draw players in, developers started to place more emphasis on narrative components in their games as the gaming industry developed. Incorporating elements of choice and consequence, in which a player's choices can have a big impact on the plot and characters. Players in the *Mass Effect* series can make

⁸ "Final Fantasy VII," Square (1997)

decisions that change the course of the plot at various points in the game, such as choosing whether to spare or kill particular characters or prioritizing certain missions. The game's ending may be significantly affected by these decisions, giving the player a sense of agency over the narrative.⁹ *The Walking Dead* game heavily emphasizes player choice and emotional storytelling, presenting players with challenging choices that may have long-lasting effects. These choices can result in various story trajectories and various possible resolutions.¹⁰

To keep players emotionally invested in the game's world and characters, developers have begun to place a greater emphasis on narrative element of their games. An example of a game with complex narrative and branching paths includes *Life is Strange*. The game has a branching narrative structure where players' decisions greatly influence the plot and its various resolutions. The game provides a powerful and moving storytelling experience because it also deals with mature themes like bullying, suicide, and mental health.¹¹

Some games have come under fire for placing an excessive amount of emphasis on narrative at the expense of the gameplay, which leaves players who are more interested in mechanics with a disappointing experience. One of those critics is an article in *The Atlantic* called *Video Games Are Better Without Stories*. Ian Bogost is arguing that:

Worse yet, the very concept of a Holodeck-aspirational interactive story implies that the player should be able to exert agency upon the dramatic arc of the plot. The one serious effort to do this was an ambitious 2005 interactive drama called *Façade*, a one-act play with roughly the plot of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. It worked remarkably well—for a video game. But it was still easily undermined. One player, for example, pretended to be a zombie, saying nothing but “brains” until the game's simulated couple threw him out.¹²

It is evident from the quote above that some people prefer narrative in the games and some the gaming experience. This “preference” is under study by two groups of scholars, which will be discussed in the following section 3.1.

3.1 Two thoughts

This subject of narrative in games is being researched by two groups of academics. According to Ludologist scholars like Jesper Juul or Espen Aarseth who study narrative in video games.

⁹ “Mass Effect” series, BioWare (2007-2012)

¹⁰ “The Walking Dead,” Telltale Games (2012)

¹¹ “Life is Strange,” Dontnod Entertainment (2015)

¹² Ian Bogost, “Video Games Are Better without Stories,” Bogost.com, accessed May 2, 2023, <http://bogost.com/writing/video-games-are-better-without-stories/>.

Their statement on this topic and explanation is the following: “Narratives are always static artifacts that fix a sequence of events into a narrow, nondynamic object.”¹³ They contend that even when a book’s author employs retrospect, readers still move forward along a predetermined path. In contrast, it is more challenging when playing video games. For instance, *Dear Esther*, the primary focus of this thesis, allows players to follow the trail but also gives them the option to turn around or jump into the sea, in which case they “die”. The fact that the player’s random action violated the static, non-dynamic narrative supports the scholar’s claim even though the game will always put the player back on the right path forward. Dave James in *Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames* states that: “Narrative can never be a ‘chance compilation’ of events, the events must somehow relate to one another, whether thematically, chronologically, or otherwise.”¹⁴ In the age of games and storytelling, this idea seems dated. Because of this, some academics from the school of thought known as “Narratologists” contend that the term “narrative” and its definition need to be updated. James provides clarity to this statement:

What constitutes a narrative must be reconsidered in light of technologies that blur or reconfigure the standard spatial /temporal distinctions, and the traditional divide between authorship and readership.¹⁵

Even some of the creators and filmmakers who have prior experience in the fields of movies and video games are more inclined toward this group of narratologists. Like the directors George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Lucas contends that the importance of narrative in video games stems from the fact that there would be anarchy and total freedom of action without it.¹⁶ The ability to immerse players in a three-dimensional world, or to put it another way, when you put the player inside the game, will change the way stories are told, according to Spielberg.¹⁷

Ragnar Tornquist, the creator of the video game *Dreamfall*, has a different perspective on the matter. His team created a game where the players can choose how it will develop. putting control of that story in the player’s hands. Although there are some limitations, the choice is somewhat available despite being preprogrammed. He is arguing that:

¹³ Dave Jones, “Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames,” *CEA Critic* 70, no. 3, 2008: 22.

¹⁴ Jones, *Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames*, 22.

¹⁵ Jones, *Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames*, 22.

¹⁶ Souvik Mukherjee, “Video Games and Storytelling,” (Palgrave Macmillan London, 2015), 6.

¹⁷ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

The fact is, once you're dealing with quests, characters, worlds, role-playing – and more complex human (or, hey, alien) emotions – then you need to tie everything together with some sort of narrative.¹⁸

Even paper books are adopting this new method of allowing the player “freedom of choice” regarding how the story develops. There are books like *My Lady's Choosing* by Kitty Curran or *Pretty Little Mistakes* by Heather McElhatton. Because they are still in the early stages of development, so-called “Choice books,” are not as in-depth as their game counterparts. But they demonstrate how storytelling is developing alongside new technology.

One example where these two schools of thought can be at odds is video game cutscenes. Cutscenes are video segments that further the plot and give an explanation. Cutscenes are necessary, in the opinion of narratologists, to tell a coherent and compelling narrative. Cutscenes can, however, obstruct the gameplay's flow and take control away from the player, according to ludologists.

It is clear that Ludology and Narratology are at odds. The players' interactions in the games are more the focus of ludology. Souvik Mukherjee in his *Video Games and Storytelling* argues that: “The Ludologists, mainly academics such as Juul, Espen Aarseth, and Markku Eskelinen, argued that although some video games may have ‘artistic ambitions’, they are fundamentally games.”¹⁹ Narratology contends that narrative should not be regarded as a supporting element of the game. Mukherjee explains that:

The so-named Narratologists, such as Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan, argue that video games are a storytelling medium because they promise to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework.²⁰

In section 3.1. we introduced two schools of thoughts Narratologist and Ludologist. These schools and their prominent scholars will be discussed in the following sections. It is vital to introduce these scholars and thoughts to understand narrative in games as a whole and to decide where the game *Dear Esther* stands concerning these schools.

¹⁸ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

¹⁹ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

²⁰ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

3.2 Ludology

Ludology was initially concerned with board games. The most popular *Dungeons and Dragons*-themed board games. Ludology's focus shifted to the emerging field of digital games as the gaming industry matured and gaming conventions multiplied. The study of aspects of games from a more mechanical/technical standpoint, as well as how the player controls the game's rules, is known as ludology. They argue that narrative in games is merely supportive, and that player influence is far more important. Mukherjee explains that:

In a recent lecture, Aarseth has spoken of the possibility of a 'broken' fictionality in video games; he still does not agree that video games tell stories. For the Ludologists, the story is still shown as an extraneous element: for the Ludologists, it is a prosthesis.²¹

Scholar as Aarseth and Jull, Ludologist, are the main supporters of this school of thought. The following sections will be dedicated to them as it is important to show some of their main thoughts that support their view on game storytelling.

3.2.1 Espen Aarseth

Espen Aarseth is a professor and game studies expert from Norway who has made significant contributions to both fields. He is the author of several important books, including *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* and *Illuminated Pixels: The Why, What, and How of Digital Game Studies*. Aarseth also contributed significantly to the emergence of game studies as a field of study, helping to establish the Digital Games Research Association and serving as its inaugural president.²²

Aarseth was born in 1965 in Bergen, Norway, and earned a degree there in 1988. His dissertation, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, which he wrote for his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of Bergen, was awarded to him in 1995.²³ The interactive aspects of video games are highlighted in Aarseth's work, and he thinks they should be analyzed as distinct, intricate cultural objects. He contends that video games are complex systems of interactions and rules that call for active participation from players rather than merely narratives or entertainment. To describe these kinds of interactive texts and "cybertext," Aarseth introduced the term "ergodic literature" in his book *Cybertext*.²⁴ As players must

²¹ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

²² Aarseth, Espen. "Espen Aarseth." IT University of Copenhagen. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://pure.itu.dk/en/persons/espen-aarseth>.

²³ Espen Aarseth, "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature," (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 1.

explore a deserted island and decipher the protagonist's memories, thoughts, and emotions, *Dear Esther* is an illustration of ergodic literature. The order and timing of these fragments are determined by the player's decisions and actions, resulting in a distinctive and non-linear narrative experience.

3.2.1.1 Hypertext

A type of digital text called hypertext enables non-linear reading and navigation through connected nodes of knowledge. Ted Nelson first proposed the idea of hypertext in the 1960s, but it wasn't until the World Wide Web's invention in the 1990s that it became a widely used method of communication and information sharing. In his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Norwegian scholar Espen Aarseth expanded on the idea of hypertext by examining how it relates to interactive narratives.²⁵

In the 1990s Aarseth set out to prove his point and stated: "Electronic texts can be better understood if they are analyzed as cybernetic systems"²⁶ In the way, he approached the subject with these "cybernetic systems" shows how Ludologist truly observes games through more machine-like processes than literary theories. Wolf and Perron explain that: "He created a typology of texts and showed that hypertext is just one possible dimension of these systemic texts, which he called 'cybertexts'."²⁷ He truly proved his point because traditional literary theories and semiotics could not explain these texts and adventure games, because they behave like machines and sign-generators.

According to Aarseth, readers must actively participate in hypertexts as well as other interactive media. With the help of hypertexts, readers can access a text in a variety of ways, and their decisions affect the story's progression.²⁸ The reading experience includes the reader's engagement with the text, and this active participation sets hypertext apart from conventional linear narratives.

One of the main benefits of hypertexts is that they let readers design and follow custom paths through a text.²⁹ Users will find it simpler to locate the information they require and to interact with the text in a way that is pertinent to their interests as a result. Hypertexts also offer

²⁵ Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 1.

²⁶ Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., "The Video Game Theory Reader" (Routledge, 2003), 223.

²⁷ Wolf and Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 223.

²⁸ Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 2.

²⁹ George P Landow, "Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization," (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 4.

a more diverse reading experience because they let readers decide which information nodes to interact with and in what order. In *Dear Esther*, for instance, the player explores a barren island and comes across slivers of the protagonist's memories, thoughts, and feelings. The choices and actions of the player control the order in which these fragments are encountered rather than being predetermined. As they must actively put the narrative's pieces together to form a coherent whole, the player's interaction with the text is crucial to the development of meaning in the game. In addition, *Dear Esther's* personalized narrative paths enable a more inclusive gaming experience. Depending on the decisions they make and the sequence in which they come across the narrative fragments, each player's experience with the game is different. As a result, a wider variety of players with various interests and preferences can now more easily access the game.

Aarseth acknowledged that readers who are used to reading traditional linear narratives might find hypertexts challenging. Hypertexts' non-linear structure and the absence of a clear narrative arc can be confusing and overwhelming. The "intertextual maze" of hypertexts, according to Aarseth, can also be a barrier to critical engagement because readers may get lost in a sea of links and nodes and never fully engage with the text.³⁰

The study of hypertexts by Aarseth in *Cybertext* demonstrates the distinctive qualities of this type of digital text as well as its potential for novel narratives and reader engagement. Although readers used to reading traditional linear narratives may find hypertexts challenging, their non-linear structure gives readers the chance to interact with the information in interesting and personalized ways. In the digital age, hypertexts remain important tools for communication and information sharing.

3.2.1.2 Ergodic Literature

Espen Aarseth came up with the term "ergodic literature" to refer to literature that requires the reader to exert non-trivial effort to read, such as navigating through a hyperlinked text or playing a video game. Contrary to traditional linear literature, which predetermines the reader's path and requires little effort to navigate, this kind of literature requires more effort. It expresses the idea that the reader must exert effort to carve a path through the text.³¹

³⁰ Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 60.

³¹ Espen Aarseth, "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature" (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1-2.

According to Aarseth, ergodic literature is not a novel idea because it appears in old texts like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. However, as more sophisticated, and dynamic forms of interactivity are now possible thanks to the development of digital technology, ergodic literature is now more common and widely available. New literary genres like interactive fiction, hypertext, and video games have emerged because of this. One of the main characteristics of ergodic literature is the concept of “reader as player,” where the reader is required to actively engage with the text and make meaningful choices that affect the outcome of narrative.³² The reader feels empowered and immersed because of this interactive element, which blurs the lines between author and reader and casts doubt on conventional ideas of authorship and literary authority.

Traditional criticism and analysis are challenged by ergodic literature because the reader’s experience is highly subjective and based on their own decisions and interactions with the text. The ergodic text cannot be reduced to a collection of static readings because it is simply too complex and dependent on the player’s choices and actions, according to Aarseth.³³ Ergodic literature not only offers fresh opportunities and challenges for both authors and readers, but it also raises concerns about the future of literary scholarship and the place of literature in society. The distinction between traditional literature and ergodic literature will probably become less clear as digital technology develops, and literary scholarship will likely place more emphasis on studying ergodic literature as a result. Ergodic literature challenges our understanding of the reader’s role in the creation and interpretation of literature as a whole and marks a significant departure from conventional forms of literature. It reveals fresh opportunities for storytelling experimentation and creativity and emphasizes how digital technology has the power to transform how people perceive literature and the human condition. For instance, hypertext fiction like Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* permits a nonlinear narrative structure and various routes through the text, creating a distinctive and engaging reading experience. The use of multimedia components like sound, graphics, and animation is also made possible using digital technology in ergodic literature, which can enhance the reading experience and open new avenues for meaning-making.

Espen Aarseth has significantly influenced game studies, especially with his work on cybertext theory and ludology. His theories have had a significant influence on how people

³² Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 14.

³³ Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 3.

perceive video games and new media, and his contributions to the field are still relevant today. Another important scholar is Jesper Juul, the following section is dedicated to him.

3.2.2 Jesper Juul

Jesper Juul is a Danish video game theorist and designer, known for his contributions to the field of game studies. He has authored several influential books, including *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* and *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. In addition to his academic work, Juul has also designed and developed several video games.

Juul's idea of "half-real" games is one of his most significant contributions to game studies. A unique feature of video games as a hybrid form of media that combines elements of both real-world activities and fictional narratives is highlighted in *Half-Real* book. The term will be defined in the section that follows.³⁴

3.2.2.1 Half-Real

In his book *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul examines the idea of playing video games and how they relate to the outside world. Video games, according to Juul, are a special kind of media that combine reality and fiction to create a "half-real" world that players can engage in.

One of Juul's main points is that video games combine rules and fiction rather than being entirely fictional. He refers to this as the "magic circle" of play, where players temporarily enter a state where the game's rules take on real significance in the virtual world.³⁵ This creates a unique experience for players, where they can interact with the game world in a way that is both real and fictional. The idea of "interactivity" is another important one in *Half-Real*. Juul contends that interactivity is a quality shared by all forms of play rather than being a particular quality of video games.³⁶ However, compared to other forms of play, video games provide a special kind of interactivity. Juul contends that because players can actively influence the game world in real-time, video games provide a higher level of interactivity.³⁷ This creates a sense of agency and immersion that is not found in other forms of play.

³⁴ Jesper Juul, "Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds" (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)

³⁵ Jesper Juul, "Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds" (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 34.

³⁶ Juul, *Half Real*, 25.

³⁷ Juul, *Half Real*, 29.

Juul also discusses the function of rules in video games and makes the case that they are crucial to the enjoyment of the game. The game's rules establish the game's world and give players a sense of accomplishment and challenge.³⁸ According to Juul, games are fundamentally about solving problems, and the rules give players the framework to do so in a way that is both satisfying and rewarding.

Half Real is a thought-provoking book that presents a distinctive viewpoint on playing video games. The arguments made by Juul regarding the magic circle, interactivity, and rules offer a helpful framework for comprehending the special qualities of video games and their connection to the outside world.

3.2.2.2 *The Art of Failure*

The Art of Failure is a book written by Jesper Juul, a Danish game designer, and scholar. Published in 2013, the book explores the concept of failure in video games and its role in the gaming experience.³⁹ Juul contends that failure is a necessary component of gaming and that players find fulfillment and enjoyment not only in winning but also in the experience of losing and making mistakes.

Juul starts off by analyzing games' characteristics and their relationship to failure. He contends that games differ from other forms of media in that they call for player participation and are created with the knowledge that players will inevitably fail. However, this failure is not seen as a bad experience but rather as an essential component of the gameplay. According to Juul, losing in games can be viewed as a form of feedback that enables players to learn from their errors and hone their skills.⁴⁰ The book then goes into detail about specific instances of failure in various games. Juul distinguishes between three types of failure: "soft" failure, which imposes a penalty or setback but permits players to continue playing; "hard" failure, which ends the game or necessitates a restart; and "ambiguous" failure, which happens when a player is unsure of whether they have succeeded or failed.⁴¹ Juul looks at how these various failures are incorporated into various game genres, including RPGs, platformers, and puzzle games.

One of the main points made in the book is that game failure can sometimes be due to the design of the game as well as player error. Juul gives examples of games that deliberately

³⁸ Juul, *Half Real*, 56.

³⁹ Jesper Juul, "The Art of Failure" (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 1.

⁴⁰ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 16.

⁴¹ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 35.

include elements of randomness or unpredictability, creating circumstances in which failure is practically guaranteed. He contends that this kind of failure can be viewed as a purposeful design decision, challenging players to adapt and come up with fresh ideas to get around the challenges put in front of them.⁴² Juul also talks about the frustration that can come from playing a game and feeling stuck or unable to move forward due to repeated failure. He contends that although feeling frustrated can be unpleasant, it can also result in greater satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment when the player eventually gets past the challenge. Juul stresses the significance of balancing difficulty and progression in game design, warning that excessive frustration can result in players quitting the game entirely.⁴³ The analysis of failure's place in video games in *The Art of Failure* is stimulating. Juul makes the case that failure is not a flaw or a bad experience but rather an essential component of the gaming experience, adding to player satisfaction and enjoyment, by examining specific examples and drawing on insights from game design.

3.2.3 Ludologic Approach

Astrid Ensslin's book *Literary Gaming* is an excellent example of how the ludological approach can be used to analyze and understand the unique properties of interactive digital narratives as a distinct form of storytelling.

Ensslin explores how literary games challenge conventional ideas of authorship, storytelling, and game design in her book by analyzing a variety of games, including interactive fiction, role-playing games, and alternate reality games.⁴⁴ She examines the fundamental gameplay mechanics and regulations through a Ludological lens, as well as the impact of player agency and interaction on the narrative experience.⁴⁵ Ensslin's method emphasizes how crucial it is to comprehend games as formal systems with their own distinctive properties and dynamics and how literary theorists must adopt new analytical techniques in order to fully grasp the potential of this new medium.⁴⁶ Ensslin shows how interactive digital narratives have the potential to produce new genres of literature and storytelling by analyzing literary games through a Ludological lens and offering insightful information about the difficulties, tactics, and interactions involved in playing these games.⁴⁷ Ensslin's work makes a strong case for the

⁴² Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 58.

⁴³ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 89-90.

⁴⁴ Astrid Ensslin, "Literary Gaming: Interactive Fiction and Video Games in Literary Study" (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 5-6.

⁴⁵ Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, 10-11.

⁴⁶ Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, 13-14.

⁴⁷ Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, 15-16.

significance of incorporating games and game studies into the field of literary theory and demonstrates the value of the Ludological approach in analyzing and comprehending the distinctive properties of interactive digital narratives.⁴⁸

The Ludologist considers a pure game that is purely gameplay-oriented, Mukherjee explains that:

As mentioned earlier, though, eminent critics (such as Juul) still do not agree with such a description, often making the claim that video games are more about the experience of playing ('fiction', according to some commentators) than about storytelling.⁴⁹

It is hard to imagine that any player would be only thrilled that he plays the game just to see how the algorithm calculates the possibilities or for pure gameplay and that storytelling is of secondary importance. Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson are arguing that:

If pushed, a common ludological position may be that narrative is fundamentally incompatible with an agency, a primary pleasure of games, and therefore is inherently less fundamental to the game experience.⁵⁰

Tom Bissell, the writer of video games, has the opinion that there are games like *Fallout 3*. This game is specific because the focus is on the world where the game takes place, not on the story that goes "through" it.⁵¹ However, he states: "But if the world is paramount, why bother with a story at all? Why not simply cut the ribbon on the invented world and let gamers explore it?"⁵² He answered this question that this kind of game, without the story would not be very involving for the players and that: "In a narrative game, story and world combine to create an experience."⁵³ On the other hand, Narratology is concerned more with narrative in the game and its effects on players, which is the main focus of the following section.

⁴⁸ Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, 17.

⁴⁹ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

⁵⁰ Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson, "Worlds in play: international perspectives on digital games research", (New York: Peter Lang, c2007.), 236.

⁵¹ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

⁵² Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

⁵³ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

3.3 Narratology

The study of the use of narrative structures in video games is known as the “narratology of games,” and it is still relatively new.⁵⁴ While gameplay mechanics are frequently assumed to be the main focus of games, a growing number of academics have discovered that games can also be effective storytelling tools that can captivate players on an emotional and intellectual level.⁵⁵

How can stories be effectively told to players in games? This is one of the main questions that narratology in games aims to address.⁵⁶ Games frequently give players the opportunity to make decisions that affect the course of the plot, in contrast to more traditional storytelling media like books or movies. For game designers, this poses a particularly difficult challenge because they must figure out how to include player choice in their narratives without sacrificing coherence or emotional impact. Many game developers have adopted branching narratives as a solution to this problem, where the plot can change based on the player’s decisions.⁵⁷ Players may feel more in control of the game because they believe their decisions are meaningfully affecting the plot. It can be challenging to put into practice, though, as designers must come up with multiple plotlines that are still unified and emotionally compelling.

Another approach that some game developers have taken is to focus on creating a strong sense of atmosphere and immersion.⁵⁸ Even though players have few options, designers can encourage emotional investment in narrative by building a rich and immersive game world. This strategy can be especially effective in horror games, where the setting and atmosphere can be used to instill a sense of dread and tension. The conflict between gameplay mechanics and storytelling is one of the major issues that narratology in games must deal with.⁵⁹ Games are frequently created to be difficult and captivating on their own, so game designers must figure

⁵⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1-20.

⁵⁵ Jesper Juul, “Games Telling Stories? - A Brief Note on Games and Narratives,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1-6.

⁵⁶ David Thue, Vadim Bulitko, Marcia L. Spetch, and Eric Wasylishen, “Interactive Storytelling: A Player Modelling Approach,” *Proceedings of the Third Artificial Intelligence and Interactive Digital Entertainment Conference*, June 6-8, 2007, Stanford, California, USA, SourceDBLP. 1-14.

⁵⁷ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 127.

⁵⁸ Lennart Nacke and Craig A. Lindley, “Affective Ludology, Flow and Immersion in a First-Person Shooter: Measurement of Player Experience,” in *Proceedings of the 2008 Conference on Future Play: Research, Play, Share*, 81-88.

⁵⁹ Mark J.P. Wolf, “Narrative in Video Games: The Challenge of Integration,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2009), 31-44.

out how to include narrative elements without detracting from the gameplay experience. Cutscenes are one of the various narrative design strategies that have emerged because of this.⁶⁰ Dialogue, and in-game storytelling mechanics like environmental storytelling.⁶¹ Cutscenes are pre-rendered sequences that play out like short movies and are used to convey key story beats or character moments.⁶² Dialogue is often used to give players insight into the personalities and motivations of the game's characters, while environmental storytelling involves using the game world itself to tell a story, often through the use of subtle visual cues or hidden secrets.⁶³

An example of how important storytelling is in the game would be the game *The Sims*. This game supports Ludology as the game has a world where the player can build a house and then do whatever he wants with characters that live there (to a certain degree). However according to the creator Will Wright, the players started to reduce the game to a more linear story, and they started to make stories in the world. So, the creator decided to open the web for any player so they can share their stories there and there are hundreds of thousands of them there.⁶⁴ As the creator states: "Players became performers. The game became a storytelling tool."⁶⁵ One of the prominent scholars of Narratology is Marie Ryan.

3.3.1 Marie-Laure Ryan

The knowledge of the applications of narrative in video games has been shaped by Ryan's work on digital narratology. She has examined the difficulties that can arise when applying conventional narrative techniques to interactive media, such as the requirement to develop numerous branching storylines that can take player choices into account and the difficulty of upholding narrative coherence in a setting where the player has control over the course of the story.⁶⁶ Ryan has written several books on narratology, including *Possible Worlds*,

⁶⁰ Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, "Introduction," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 1-16.

⁶¹ James Newman, "Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2009), 235-260.

⁶² Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor," 7.

⁶³ Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 99-119.

⁶⁴ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

⁶⁵ Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 6.

⁶⁶ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Avatars of Story," (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 136-139.

Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory,⁶⁷ *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature*⁶⁸ and *Electronic Media*, and *Avatars of Story*.⁶⁹

The idea of narrative as virtual reality: In her 2001 book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan argues that narratives can be seen as virtual realities. She suggests that both narratives and virtual realities create a sense of immersion and presence and that both rely on interactivity and world-building to be effective. Marie-Laure Ryan's idea of narrative as virtual reality can be seen as particularly relevant to the video game *Dear Esther*. *Dear Esther* is a game that is focused on immersive storytelling, with the player exploring an island while the narrative unfolds around them. The game features beautiful visuals and an evocative soundtrack and encourages players to engage with the story in a way that is similar to how they might engage with a traditional novel. Her idea will be explained in the following section.

3.3.1.1 Narrative as Virtual Reality

Marie-Laure Ryan's book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, examines the connection between narrative and digital media, particularly virtual reality. The 2001 publication of the book has since established its significance in the field of digital narratology and contributed to the understanding of the value of narrative in interactive media.

Ryan's work on narrative and virtual reality is extensively cited in the field of digital narratology.⁷⁰ According to Ryan, narrative in virtual reality is fundamentally different from the narrative in other forms of media, such as literature or film, due to the immersive and interactive nature of the medium.⁷¹ Ryan refers to this type of narrative as "ergodic" literature, meaning that it requires non-trivial effort on the part of the user to navigate narrative.⁷² Ryan identifies three levels of immersion in virtual reality: sensory immersion, mental immersion, and participatory immersion.⁷³ She argues that immersion is crucial to the success of virtual reality narratives, as it allows the user to become fully engaged in narrative world. Ryan also

⁶⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory." Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

⁶⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media." Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

⁶⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Avatars of Story." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁷⁰ Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, ed. Marianne van den Boomen, et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 154.

⁷¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.

⁷² Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 1.

⁷³ Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 119.

explores the challenges of adapting traditional narrative techniques to virtual reality, suggesting that virtual reality narratives should be structured as a series of smaller, interconnected narratives that allow the user to explore and interact with narrative world in a non-linear fashion.⁷⁴

Another key concept introduced in Ryan's book is the idea of "metalepsis," which refers to the blurring of boundaries between narrative world and the real world.⁷⁵ Ryan argues that this blurring of boundaries can be used to great effect in virtual reality narratives, but also raises ethical concerns about the potential for manipulation and exploitation. Ryan's work on narrative as virtual reality has been foundational to the field of digital narratology, providing key insights into the challenges and opportunities of storytelling in virtual environments.⁷⁶

The study of narratology in games, which examines how narrative structures are used in video games, is fascinating and quickly developing. People can learn more about the distinct storytelling potential of this medium, as well as the difficulties and opportunities that come with it, by looking at the various approaches to narrative design used by game developers. The field of narratology is assisting us in better understanding how and why games can engage players on a deep and emotional level, whether through branching narratives, immersive environments, or subtle environmental storytelling. Now that these two schools were introduced, the following section will be concerned with the game *Dear Esther* and its analysis.

⁷⁴ Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 122.

⁷⁵ Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 150.

⁷⁶ Janet H. Murray, "Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice" (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 118.

4 INTRODUCTION OF THE GAME DEAR ESTHER

Dear Esther, is a video game developed by The Chinese Room and originally released in 2008 as a mod for the game Half-Life 2. In 2012, a standalone version was released for Microsoft Windows and later, for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. The game is often cited as an example of a “walking simulator,” a genre of games that prioritize exploration and storytelling over traditional gameplay mechanics such as combat or puzzles. One of the academic literature exploring this game, could be *From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre* by Felix Zimmermann, which explores the evolution of the so-called “walking simulator” genre in video games. The paper argues that games such as *Dear Esther*, which have been labeled as walking simulators due to their focus on exploration and environmental storytelling, are in fact part of a broader trend toward “ambience action games.”⁷⁷

Dear Esther is set on a fictional Hebridean island and follows the story of a man who is coming to terms with the loss of his wife. The game has no clear objectives or traditional gameplay mechanics, instead relying on the player’s exploration of the island and the narration that unfolds as they progress through the game. The story is told through the protagonist’s and other characters’ individual monologues, as well as through subtle changes to the island’s landscape and environmental cues. Particularly in digital narratology, the game has become a popular topic of academic study and critical analysis due to its minimalist design and emphasis on storytelling and exploration. The game has received praise for its inventive storytelling style, its capacity to stir up strong feelings in players, as well as its eye-catching graphics and moody soundtrack.

Dear Esther, is a fascinating example of how video games can be used to create immersive and emotional narrative experiences that challenge traditional conceptions of what a game can be.

⁷⁷ Felix Zimmermann, “From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre,” *Press Start* 5, no. 2 (2019)

Figure 1 *The Chinese Room. Dear Esther. Windows/Mac OS X. The Chinese Room, 2012.*

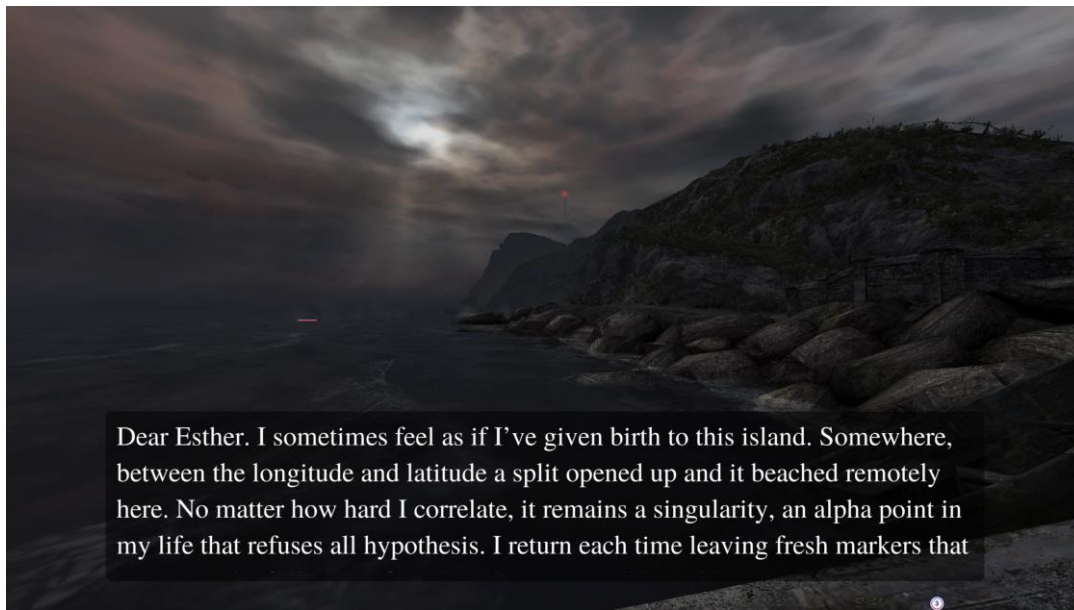
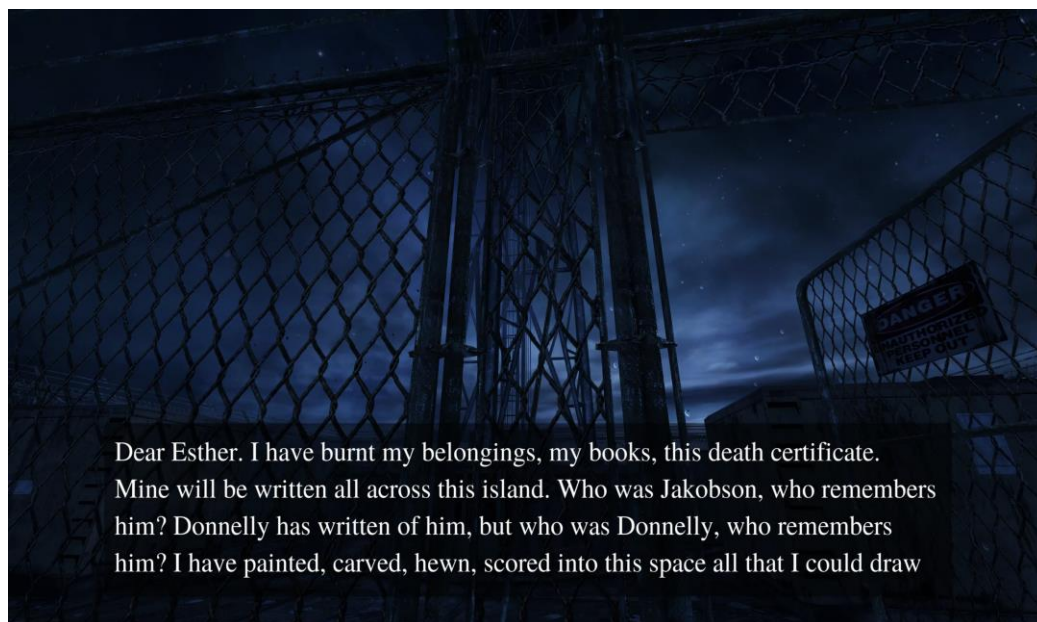


Figure 2 *The Chinese Room. Dear Esther. Windows/Mac OS X. The Chinese Room, 2012.*



4.1 The main characters

The main character of *Dear Esther* is never explicitly named but is referred to in the game's narration as "Esther's husband" or "the protagonist." His voice is heard throughout the game as he delivers a series of monologues that offer glimpses into his inner thoughts and feelings about the loss of his wife and his own sense of identity. The player can explore the island and uncover pieces of the protagonist's backstory and his relationship with Esther through these monologues and environmental cues.

The character is portrayed as a deeply flawed and complex individual, struggling to come to terms with his grief and the guilt he feels over his wife's death. His monologues are poetic and introspective, touching on themes of love, loss, and the beauty of nature. As the player progresses through the game, the character's story unfolds in a non-linear manner, with pieces of the puzzle gradually coming together to create a fuller picture of his past and present.

And then there are a series of characters who are only briefly mentioned in the game by the reader. His wife, a shepherd who lived on the island, a drunk man who killed his wife, because he had too much and he drove anyway, or a cartographer who described the island.

4.2 Theme of the game

The theme of *Dear Esther* is primarily focused on grief, loss, and the human experience of mourning and how it affects our memory and identity. The game explores the psychological and emotional journey of the protagonist as he attempts to come to terms with the death of his wife and his own sense of guilt and identity.

A monologue that the player hears early in the game serves as an illustration of the game's theme of grief. In the monologue, the protagonist talks about losing his wife in a car accident and how hard it was for him to move on. The protagonist's thoughts and emotions blend together in the monologue in a jumbled and disorienting way, mirroring the experience of grief. The monologue is delivered in a stream-of-consciousness style.

The protagonist's memories are triggered by several visual and auditory cues that the player comes across as they explore the island. To reflect how distorted and unreliable memories can be, these memories are frequently presented in a fragmented and surreal manner. For instance, the protagonist's experience of being lost at sea may be described in a monologue when the player discovers a wrecked ship on the shore. A sense of unreality is created by the ship's distorted and dreamlike presentation, along with the surreal imagery and distorted sound effects, which mirror the protagonist's own skepticism about the accuracy of his memories. As the player advances through the game, they come across several mysterious images and symbols that are repeated all over the scene. Later it is discovered that these symbols are connected to the protagonist's memories of his wife, and by deciphering the symbols, the player can piece together the tale of what transpired to them. A powerful method to evoke memories and the way that pieces of the past can appear out of nowhere is by using visual symbols as a narrative device.

The protagonist of the game is never identified, and this is done on purpose. However, the player starts to piece together a picture of who he is and what has happened to him as they explore the island and listen to his monologues. The game also offers a variety of potential outcomes, each of which presents a unique viewpoint on the identity of the protagonist and the story's events. This deft exploration of the theme of identity and how it can be elusive and shifting makes use of ambiguity and multiple interpretations.

The themes of grief, loss, and the power of storytelling make *Dear Esther* a deeply contemplative and emotionally resonant game, inviting players to reflect on their own experiences of loss and the role that storytelling plays in shaping our understanding of the world around us.

Figure 3 *The Chinese Room. Dear Esther. Windows/Mac OS X. The Chinese Room, 2012.*

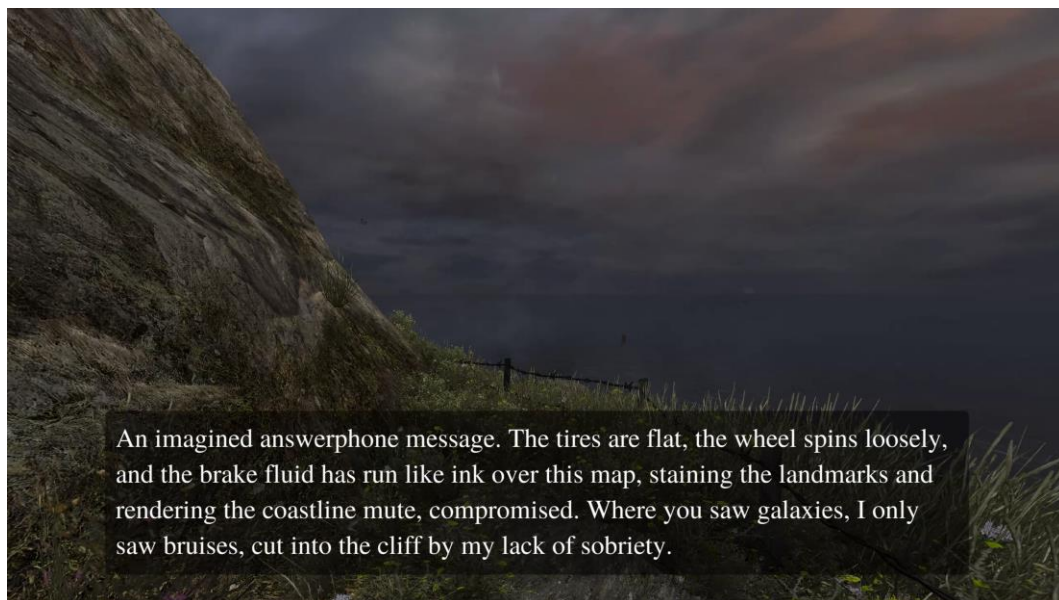
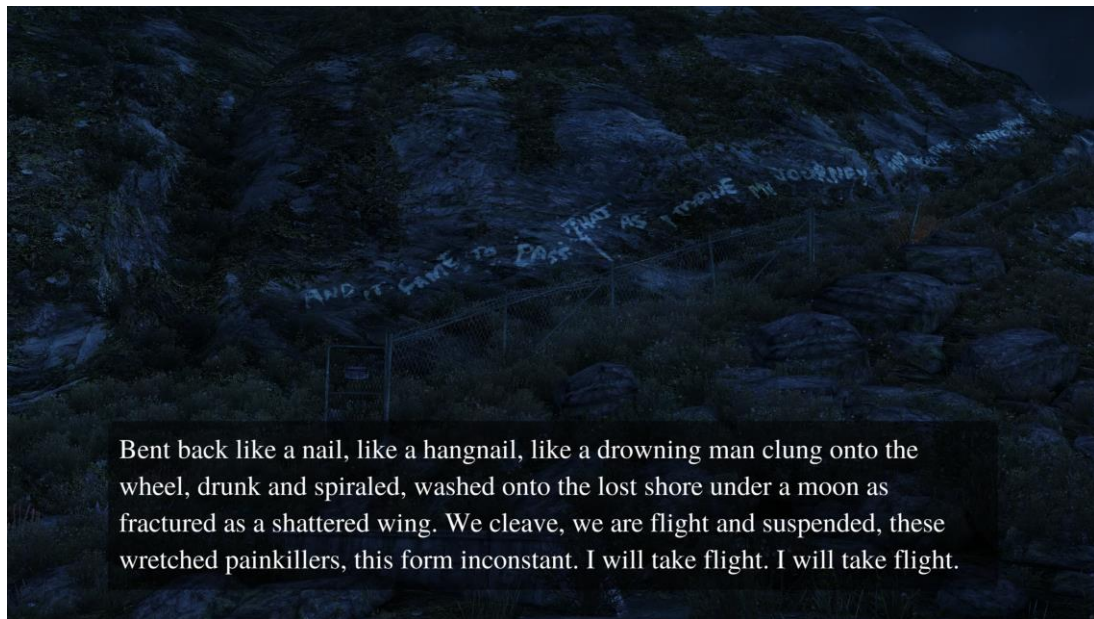


Figure 4 *The Chinese Room*. *Dear Esther*. Windows/Mac OS X. *The Chinese Room*, 2012.



4.3 Symbols

In the context of video games, symbols can take on an even greater significance, as they can be woven into the gameplay mechanics and the environment itself. *Dear Esther*, is an excellent example of this, as the game is full of visual symbols that are repeated throughout the environment, such as the patterns on the rocks and the seagulls that circle overhead. These symbols are not just decorative elements but are designed to convey deeper meanings and to help players piece together the story of the protagonist's loss and grief. Isaac Kitony in his *Effect of Symbolism in Literature* explains what part the linguistic device, such as symbolism, plays in literature and its importance: According to an article, symbolism is a literary device that goes beyond the literal meaning of words, people, marks, abstract ideas, and locations to represent something else. The article cites works such as *The Birthmark* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin as examples of works where symbolism has been predominantly used.⁷⁸

4.3.1 Lighthouse

The lighthouse serves as a powerful symbol of hope, redemption, and the quest for meaning in the face of loss and grief throughout *Dear Esther*. Both literally and figuratively, the lighthouse acts as a compass for the protagonist as he travels the perilous path of his own emotions.

⁷⁸ Isaac Kitonyi, "Effect of Symbolism in Literature", 2020, 1.

The lighthouse literally acts as a beacon of light, shedding light on the island's gloomy and stormy landscape. The lighthouse acts as a constant point of reference, providing a sense of direction and purpose as the player moves through the game's environment. The lighthouse, however, also has a deeper symbolic meaning, representing the protagonist's own search for understanding and meaning after the passing of his wife. The protagonist is plagued by regret and guilt throughout the entire game as well as memories of his wife. During these overwhelming emotions, the lighthouse represents his desire to discover a sense of meaning and purpose. In the protagonist's quest to reconcile his own sorrow and guilt, the lighthouse stands in for the prospect of redemption and the hope of a fresh start. The lighthouse not only has symbolic value but also has a big part in the story of the game. The game's protagonist's past and motivations are gradually revealed to the player as they advance through the game. When the player ascends to the top of the lighthouse in the final scene, the full scope of the protagonist's emotional journey is revealed. These revelations come to a head.

In her article *Imagery and Symbolism in To the Lighthouse*, Ana María Fortes analyzes the use of imagery and symbolism in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. She concludes that: "As a conclusion, the lighthouse represents the definition of life, the process of moving towards what one desires."⁷⁹ In the game *Dear Esther*, the main protagonist is searching for understanding and meaning after the passing of his wife. It is his desire to find these answers.

The lighthouse in *Dear Esther* serves as a powerful symbol for the protagonist's search for meaning and redemption in the face of grief and loss. It represents the possibility of a new beginning and the hope for a brighter future, even during overwhelming emotional turmoil.

4.3.2 Darkness

The melancholy that surrounds the entire game *Dear Esther* acts as a powerful portrayal of the protagonist's emotional state and the recurring themes of loneliness, uncertainty, and sorrow in the story. The player is immediately immersed in complete darkness, with just the murky light of a lighthouse offering sporadic illumination. This establishes the mood for the remainder of the game, which is marked by never-ending darkness. The protagonist feels alone as he travels the barren island, and the darkness symbolizes his inner anguish and confusion. Additionally, the lack of light fosters an atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity, making it challenging for the player to distinguish between the actual and the imagined. There are several

⁷⁹ Ana María Forte, "Imagery and Symbolism in *To the Lighthouse*," February 1, 2017.

occasions where darkness is used in the game to make the player feel strong emotions. For instance, in one sequence, the player must find their way through a dark tunnel using nothing but the sound of their own footsteps. As the player is forced to face the unknowable and the unseen, this passage instills a feeling of suspense and anxiety. In a different setting, the player must move along a pitch-black, stormy beach with nothing but lightning strikes for illumination. As a result of the player being exposed to the elements and the unknown, there is a feeling of dread and risk. Darkness is prominent in *Dear Esther*, reinforcing the game's fundamental concepts of uncertainty, solitude, and sorrow while also acting as a powerful symbol of the protagonist's emotional condition. The game forces the player to face their own fears and concerns by submerging them in darkness, which generates a sense of confusion and ambiguity. The darkness ultimately acts as a reminder that even in the most hopeless of circumstances, there is always a chance for light and hope.

Ahmad Yasir Dhain in his *Symbolism in Heart of Darkness* states that:

In *Heart of Darkness*, the 'darkness' symbolizes and represents various parts of reality, human nature, and the corruption of decency when faced with insurmountable obstacles.⁸⁰

Darkness in *Heart of Darkness* serves as the capacity for evil and corruption to dwell inside the human mind as well as the decline of mankind when it is exposed to harsh and merciless conditions. The protagonist of *Dear Esther* also experiences loneliness, sadness, and inner struggle as he travels across a dim and unsettling terrain. Darkness is employed to depict these feelings. These two symbols, however, also stand in contrast to one another. *Heart of Darkness* is connected to the characters and setting, whereas *Dear Esther* is more concerned with the player's feelings and experiences. In *Heart of Darkness*, darkness is associated with the decline of morality and the human spirit, but in *Dear Esther*, darkness is associated more with sadness and mourning. However, both pieces show how darkness can be an effective symbol for expressing complex feelings and concepts and how it may elicit a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability that pushes the reader or player further into the story.

4.3.3 Cave

In *Dear Esther*, the cave is a powerful symbol for the protagonist's journey into his subconscious mind and his battle with his most private feelings and ideas. The player will come across the cave on multiple occasions during the game, which acts as a repeating representation

⁸⁰ Ahmad Yasir Dhain, "Symbolism in Heart of Darkness," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol. 3, no. 2, (April - June 2015): 486.

of the protagonist's quest for self-discovery. The cave is a symbol of the protagonist's subconscious mind, a gloomy, unsettling space filled with buried ideas, memories, and feelings. The player advances through the game by entering further into the cave, discovering its crevices, and learning more and more about the protagonist's hardships in the past and present. The cave is effectively employed as a symbol throughout the game in several different places. For example, one scenario requires the player to go across a dangerous underground river, simulating the risks and uncertainty involved in investigating one's subconscious mind. Another sequence exposes the player to several pictures and symbols that stand in for the protagonist's emotional baggage and prior traumas. The cave acts as a powerful symbol for the protagonist's inner journey toward self-discovery and emotional healing during these sequences. This symbolism of cave in the game *Dear Esther* is supported by the Cambridge Dictionary of Literary Symbolism:

This image of epistemological darkness seems to contribute to Blake's image of the human skull as a cave. In the modern age 'Man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through, narrow chinks of his cavern.'⁸¹

The developers reinforce the game's primary themes of grief, loss, and emotional recovery by employing the cave as a repeating motif throughout the whole game. This gives the story structure and consistency. In the end, the cave serves as a reminder that the path to self-discovery is frequently dark and perilous, but the only way to genuinely heal and go on is by facing one's deepest fears and emotions.

⁸¹ Michael, Ferber, "Dictionary of Literary Symbols," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 3rd ed., 40.

Figure 5 *The Chinese Room*. Dear Esther. Windows/Mac OS X. *The Chinese Room*, 2012.

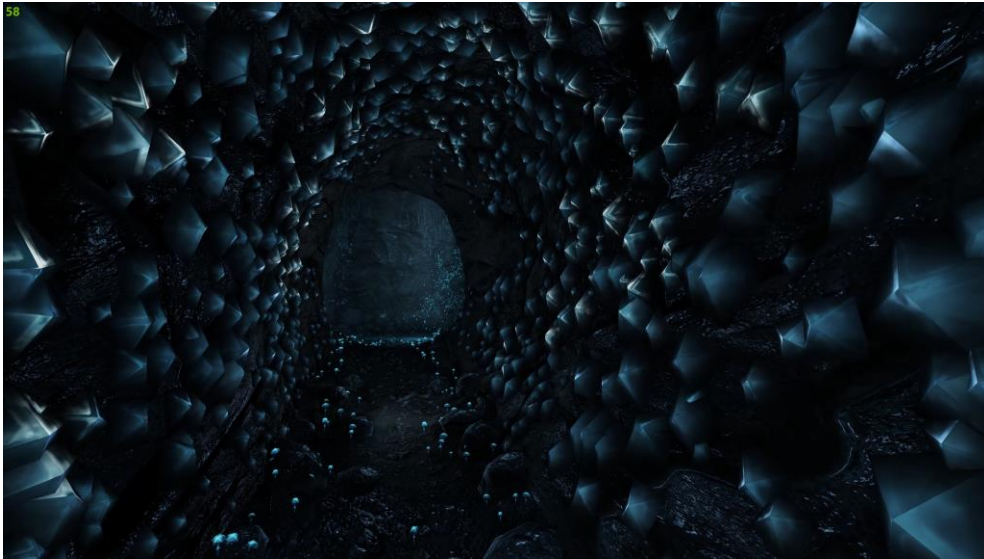
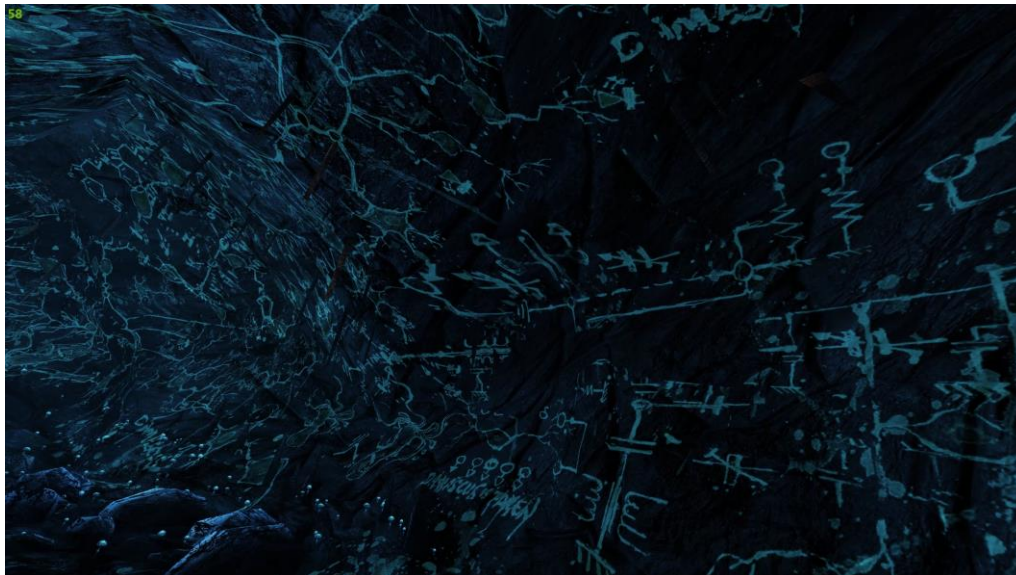


Figure 6 *The Chinese Room*. Dear Esther. Windows/Mac OS X. *The Chinese Room*, 2012.



4.3.4 Bird

Birds appear frequently throughout the game and act as an effective representation of spirituality, freedom, and optimism. Birds are frequently connected to freedom, flight, and escape, and Dear Esther effectively makes use of this symbolism. Birds are encountered often by the player throughout the game, ranging from common species like seagulls and crows to more uncommon ones like flamingos and swans. The protagonist's path toward transcendence and emotional recovery is symbolized by these birds, which also serve as an important reminder of the freedom and beauty of the natural world. The game contains multiple situations when

birds are employed to express important ideas and emotions. For instance, in one scenario, the player sees a flock of birds flying over the ocean, which stands in for the protagonist's desire for freedom and escape. The player encounters a swan in another scenario, which represents elegance, beauty, and emotional purity. The birds in *Dear Esther* act as a potent representation of hope and redemption throughout these sequences, serving to remind the player that, even under the most trying circumstances, there is always a chance for transcendence and emotional recovery. This claim supports the *Dictionary of Literary Symbolisms*:

The symbolism of birds is sometimes metonymical in origin, as when larks represent dawn and nightingales night, or swallows and cuckoos stand for the arrival of spring, because the birds belong to these phenomena. More often it is metaphorical, as when cuckoos stand for cuckoldry, or nightingales and swans symbolize poets, because the birds resemble them.⁸²

The frequent usage of birds in *Dear Esther* serves as a compelling metaphor for freedom, optimism, and transcendence. The creators evoke a sense of surprise and amazement that draws the player further into the story by harnessing the wonder and beauty of nature to express complex emotions and concepts. In the end, the birds remind us that there is always a chance for flight, freedom, and transcendence, even in the most hopeless circumstances.

4.3.5 Island

In the game *Dear Esther*, the island itself serves as a potent symbol, representing both the physical and emotional landscape of the protagonist's journey. As the player navigates the island, they encounter a variety of natural and man-made structures, each with its own symbolic significance.

Isolation is one of the main themes related to the island. The sea's vastness surrounds the island where the player is alone, acting as a physical barrier separating the protagonist from the outside world. The barren landscape, which is dotted with long-abandoned structures and other remnants of human activity, reflects this feeling of isolation. Loss is another important theme connected to the island. The island acts as a sort of transitional area between the past and the present for the game's protagonist, who is mourning the loss of his wife and child. The island's abandoned buildings and ruinous landscape serve as symbols of the unknown future while serving as reminders of what has been lost. The island also serves as a metaphor for the

⁸² Michael, Ferber, "Dictionary of Literary Symbols," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 3rd ed., 25.

human psyche, which is a place where memories, dreams, and emotions are all mixed. Players are encouraged to delve into the depths of their own consciousness and consider the nature of memory, perception, and the human experience thanks to the game's nonlinear narrative structure and dreamlike atmosphere.

Similar symbolism of island can be seen in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, where Crusoe lives on the deserted island only vast sea surrounds this island. Crusoe is on this island separated from civilization as the main character of the game *Dear Esther* in his mind is. So, to support my claim about symbolism of island in the game *Dear Esther*, *Robinson Crusoe* is great example. The island serves as a representation of seclusion and independence in *Robinson Crusoe*. On the island, Crusoe must fend for himself. He must construct his own shelter, grow his own food, and learn to survive in a dangerous environment. As Crusoe learns to rely on his own abilities and resources to live, the island also represents his own path of self-awareness and self-reliance. The island also represents the protagonist's personal loneliness and introspection in *Dear Esther*. The protagonist, who is trying to cope with his personal loss and trauma, gives the player insights into his deepest thoughts and feelings as he travels the island. As the protagonist faces his darkest demons and starts to find peace, the island represents his own journey toward emotional recovery and self-discovery.

4.4 Type of narrator

In video games, the concept of a narrator can be tricky, especially in first-person games. In these games, the player takes on the role of the protagonist and sees the action from their point of view. However, it can be challenging to distinguish between the player's thoughts and actions and those of the protagonist, making the narrator's presence in games somewhat vague. Some scholars have argued that the player in first-person games can be considered the narrator because they are actively influencing the plot through their choices and actions, according to scholarly literature that has addressed this issue.⁸³ Others have argued that the game world itself can be viewed as the narrator because the setting and non-playable characters provide context and information that shapes the player's understanding of the narrative.⁸⁴

⁸³ Jesper Juul, "Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds," (MIT Press, 2005), p. 65.

⁸⁴ Janet H Murray, "Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace," (Free Press, 1997), p. 102.

The narrative of the game *Dear Esther* heavily relies on the protagonist's mental state, and the player must work through his jumbled memories and hallucinations to piece the story together. The game's use of environmental storytelling, wherein objects and locations on the island suggest various interpretations of events, emphasizes the narrator's unreliability even more. The narrator occasionally appears to be speaking directly to someone or something, which gives the narrative a degree of confusion. The player never really knows whom the narrator is talking to or whether the voice is just his own subconscious speaking.

The use of a first-person unreliable narrator in *Dear Esther* adds to the game's dreamlike, surreal atmosphere, inviting players to explore the depths of the protagonist's psyche and engage with the story on a deeply introspective level.

4.5 The Space of the narrative

The space of the narrative in the game *Dear Esther* is a central aspect of its storytelling. The game takes place on a deserted Hebridean island, which is a vast and open space that players are free to explore at their own pace. The island is dotted with landmarks such as the lighthouse, radio tower, and shipwreck, which serve as points of interest for the player to discover.

The island's natural landscapes also play a significant role in the game's narrative. The player is encouraged to wander through fields of grass and climb rocky cliffs, all while being surrounded by the sounds of the ocean and the cries of seabirds. This creates a sense of immersion in the game world, as the player is transported to a remote and isolated location.

The article *Haptic Landscapes: Dear Esther and Embodied Video Game Space* by Oscar Moralde explores this topic of the space. As the genre of this game is called "walking simulator" it is important for this genre to have engaging environment and this claim is trying the author of the article explains. He claims that:

Article explores the ways in which video games can produce embodied spatial experiences through reversible phenomenological relationships with players.⁸⁵

The following section will be discussing the side that this game *Dear Esther* is supporting and why, based on this analysis.

⁸⁵ Oscar Moralde, "Haptic Landscapes: Dear Esther and Embodied Video Game Space," *Media Fields Journal* (2015).

5 LUDOLOGY AND THE NARRATOLOGY

While both ludology and narratology have their strengths and weaknesses, I believe that a combination of both approaches is necessary for a full understanding of video games. At this moment there is no real agreement between these two groups, and it would require finding or creating a game that has 50% of pure game experience and 50% of narrative experience. After all, even this thesis is shifting to the side of the narratology ideology that the narrative in the game is very important. That is one of the reasons why I chose to analyze in this thesis the game *Dear Esther* because this game considering the Ludological approach has little to offer from the game experience as it is only a “walking simulator”. On the other hand, from the narratological approach, the game has a strong narrative. That is the reason why I analyzed the game as I did above this paragraph, to prove my point that this game plays into the cards of narratology. It would be essential to write another thesis on finding the right game and create some concession between these two groups or to create modernized literary analyses which could be applied more to the game narrative. This modernized literary analysis would be beneficial for the whole literary world as at this moment most scholars do not consider the games as something worth to analyses and comparing with their book counterparts.

In the next section, the focus will be on Reader-response theory and its application to the game *Dear Esther*.

6 READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Reader response theory is a literary theory that emphasizes the role of the reader in interpreting and responding to a literary work. Rather than seeing the meaning of a text as fixed and objective, reader-response theory suggests that it is constructed through the subjective interpretation and response of the reader.⁸⁶ This section will explore the key ideas of reader response theory and the prominent figures of the theory.

6.1 Wolfgang Iser

Wolfgang Iser was a prominent literary scholar who made significant contributions to the field of reader-response theory. He argued that reading is not a passive activity, but an active one, where readers construct meaning through their interactions with the text.

The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett, Iser's most well-known work, explores the idea of the "implied reader." Every text creates an implied reader, a fictitious reader who the author assumes will read and interpret the text in a specific way, according to Iser's theory. The implied reader is a literary device used to clarify the meaning of the text; it is not a real person. Iser held the opinion that readers' interpretations of a text were influenced both by the text itself and by their own experiences, knowledge, and beliefs.

6.1.1 The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett

The phrase "implied reader" is one of the central ideas in Iser's book. The implied reader, according to Iser, is: "the image of a hypothetical reader"⁸⁷ that the text conjures up and that "shapes the norms and expectations governing the reader's response."⁸⁸ The implied reader is a literary device used to aid in the reader's comprehension of the text; it is not a real person. It is a projection of how the writer thinks the reader will understand the text. For example, the implied reader of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is familiar with the social and cultural setting of America in the 1920s. The book is set in this era and presupposes that the reader is familiar with the attitudes and cultural trends of the time. For instance, the novel depicts the

⁸⁶ Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 142.

⁸⁷ Wolfgang Iser, "The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 33.

⁸⁸ Wolfgang Iser, "The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 33.

excess and extravagance of the affluent upper class, which was typical of the 1920s. This context and the significance of the character's actions and behaviors within this cultural context are expected to be understood by the implied reader.

The notion of “gaps” in the text is another important idea in Iser's book. Gaps in a text require the reader to actively fill in details to create meaning. Because they force the reader to actively engage with the text and draw on their own experiences and knowledge to make sense of it, gaps, according to Iser, are crucial to the creation of meaning in a text. Instead of blindly accepting the author's intended meaning, gaps enable the reader to develop their own original interpretations of the text.⁸⁹ The example could be: For the reader to fully comprehend the characters' intentions and actions, there are narrative gaps present throughout the entire book. The enigmatic past of the fictional character Jay Gatsby is one illustration of this. Although Gatsby is the book's title character, not much is known about him or how he came to amass his wealth. The reader is left to make assumptions and piece together hints from the scattered pieces of knowledge that are provided throughout the novel. As a result, there is a void in the text that the reader must fill with their own inferences and presumptions.

The literary theory and criticism have been significantly impacted by Iser's book. It has influenced the growth of reader-response theory, which emphasizes the reader's active participation in the meaning-making process. Iser's theories have also been applied to the analysis of a variety of literary texts, including both classic and contemporary fiction.

6.2 Stanley Fish

Popular literary theorist and legal expert Stanley Fish has made significant contributions to the fields of literary studies and legal theory. Fish examines how texts create meaning in his writings and how readers participate in this process. He is renowned for emphasizing the value of interpretive communities and how these communities influence how people understand texts.

Fish's method of approaching literary theory is based on the notion that texts do not have meaning inherent to them; rather, meaning is created through the reader-text relationship. Fish makes the compelling case in his widely read book *Is There a Text in This Class?* that the

⁸⁹ Iser, “The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett,” 37.

reader's interpretive strategies and the interpretive community they are a part of, rather than the author's intentions or objective standards, determine the meaning of a text.⁹⁰

6.2.1 Is There a Text in This Class?

In *Is There a Text in This Class?* Stanley Fish questions accepted notions regarding the composition of literary texts and the function of the author. According to Fish, meaning is not innate in texts but is instead created through the dialogue between the text and the reader. He focuses on how interpretive communities influence how people understand texts and makes the case that readers approach texts as members of a larger community that holds similar beliefs and values rather than as isolated individuals.⁹¹

Fish's theories are based on the idea that meaning is not fixed or objective and that texts do not have an inherent ability to interpret themselves. Instead, meaning is created by the reader and the interpretive community to which they belong. According to him, readers', and the interpretive community's interpretive strategies, not the author's intentions or objective standards, determine a text's meaning.⁹² Fish challenged stereotypes about the nature of literary texts and had a significant impact on literary studies with his emphasis on the function of interpretive communities. He contends that when reading a text, readers bring their own presumptions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds with them, and that these elements influence how they interpret and give meaning to the text. According to Fish, interpretation is a social and historical activity that is influenced by the broader cultural and intellectual environment in which it occurs.⁹³

The fields of literary theory and legal theory have greatly benefited from Stanley Fish's work. Traditional notions about the nature of literary texts and the role of the author have been questioned by his emphasis on the significance of interpretive communities and the reader's role in the construction of meaning.

⁹⁰ Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 5-6.

⁹¹ Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 5-6.

⁹² Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 10-11.

⁹³ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 127-128.

6.3 Reader response theory and *Dear Esther*

At its core, *Dear Esther* is a game that invites the player to explore a deserted island and uncover the story of a man named Esther. The game is devoid of traditional gameplay mechanics and instead offers a contemplative experience, with the player wandering through a series of landscapes while listening to a voiceover that tells the story of Esther and her relationship with the player character. The game is deliberately ambiguous, with much of the story left open to interpretation.

6.3.1 Implied reader

Dear Esther's implied audience is someone who is prepared to interact with the game's disjointed narrative and employ their own interpretive techniques to derive meaning from the game's various elements. Like other works of art, *Dear Esther's* meaning is not exclusively derived from the game's text but rather develops because of the reader's or player's interpretive techniques. Narrative of the game is purposefully disjointed and nonlinear, requiring the reader or player to actively interact with it to derive meaning from its various components.

Dear Esther, is a good example of Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader in this way. The narrative of the game is not set in stone or predetermined; rather, it develops as a result of the reader's or player's interpretive techniques. The player/reader is encouraged to take part in the narrative's development and to use their own interpretive techniques to make sense of the game's various components.

6.3.2 The "gap"

The literature contains "gaps" or "blanks" that demand the reader to actively contribute to the construction of narrative, as Iser points out in *The Implied Reader*. These are areas in the text where the reader is expected to fill in the blanks or draw connections between various plot points. By doing this, the reader transforms from a passive consumer of information into an active participant in narrative's development.

There are also holes in *Dear Esther* that force the player to actively contribute to the narrative's development. The game's narrative is purposefully nonlinear and disjointed, forcing the player to put various pieces together to understand the overall plot. Poetic monologues, moody music, and surreal graphics combine to create a dreamlike and impressionistic world that can be interpreted in a variety of ways in the game. *Dear Esther* serves as an example of

“gaps” in the text, according to Iser. For the player to actively interact with the game and derive meaning from its various elements, the game purposefully leaves narrative gaps. The player actively contributes to the creation of narrative rather than being a passive recipient of information.

Specific examples of the “gaps” are the following: The game never explicitly reveals the identity or past of the player character. It is up to the player to piece together hints from the setting and the character’s dialogue to create their own version of the character’s past. The story of the game is presented nonlinearly, with the player character traveling around the island in what appears to be a random order. To create a cohesive story, the player must link the different narrative components together. The use of poetic monologues in the game causes narrative gaps that demand participation from the player to be understood. For instance, the player character refers to the island as being “cursed” and “haunted” in one monologue. It is up to the player to determine what these expressions mean and how they fit into the overall story of the game. The narrative is interrupted by the game’s surreal and dreamlike imagery, which forces the player to interact with the game to understand its significance. For instance, the game includes several instances of odd symbols and markings that are never explained. It is up to the player to decipher the significance of these symbols and how they relate to the game’s overarching plot.

6.3.3 Symbolism and Reader response

Dear Esther, is a game that is heavily focused on creating a rich and evocative atmosphere through its use of symbolic imagery. The game features a variety of recurring symbols and motifs that are used to create a sense of mystery and intrigue. Symbolism in detail was already discussed in the previous section. These symbols are purposefully left open-ended so that the player can create their own interpretation of the game’s various components. Therefore, the player’s reaction to the game is greatly influenced by how they personally interpret these symbols and how they relate to the game’s plot. When it comes to *Dear Esther*, the game’s use of symbolic imagery enables a variety of player interpretations and reactions offers a valuable perspective on the complex and dynamic relationship between player and game.

6.3.3.1 Concrete symbolism and Reader response

Depending on how the player interprets it, *Dear Esther*’s darkness can represent a variety of different things. As the player must maneuver through environments where danger may be hiding in the shadows, some players may interpret the darkness as symbolizing a feeling of fear or uncertainty. Others might view the darkness as a representation of sorrow and loss, signifying

the emotional darkness that the characters in the game are going through. The player's perception of the symbolic imagery in the game has a big impact on how they react to the game's use of darkness. According to the player's interpretation, the birds in *Dear Esther* can also represent a variety of different things. For instance, seagulls are frequently connected to the sea and the coast, so their inclusion in the game may be interpreted as a symbolizing the game's setting on an isolated island. A foreshadowing of the game's themes of loss and grief could be made by the game's use of ravens, which are frequently connected to death and the afterlife. The player's interpretation of the game's symbolic imagery has a big impact on how they react to the use of birds in the game. The reader response theory states according to the explanation in sections above: A work of art's meaning is not predetermined but rather is created by the reader's interpretation of it. In *Dear Esther*, the use of darkness by the game leaves narrative holes that force the player to actively participate in the game and develop their own interpretation of the plot.

6.3.4 Subjectivity in Dear Esther

The experience of *Dear Esther* is significantly influenced by subjectivity. The story of the game is purposefully ambiguous and unfinished, allowing for a wide variety of interpretations. As a result, the player's individual experiences and feelings have a significant impact on how they interpret the game's plot. For instance, depending on the player's personal experiences with loss and grief, the game's central theme can be interpreted in a variety of ways. If a player has personally dealt with loss or grief, they may bring those feelings and memories to the game, which may affect how they interpret the story. Due to this, they might interpret certain game graphics or symbols differently than other players who haven't gone through the same kinds of feelings. The use of imagery and symbolism in the game is also incredibly subjective. Depending on the player's experiences, cultural background, and emotional state, these symbols' meanings can vary significantly.

6.3.5 Active Participation in Dear Esther

Playing the game *Dear Esther* allows the player to actively participate in an unusual manner. *Dear Esther*, is less concerned with task completion or puzzle-solving than other games, which place more of an emphasis on investigation, observation, and interpretation. The goal is for the player to actively explore the island, investigate different locations and things, and piece together the narrative based on their observations and reflections. With this kind of gameplay, the player must actively participate in the experience, be curious and observant, and contribute

to the development of the story. In this way, the player's active involvement in *Dear Esther* is crucial to the game's overall enjoyment. The story would be left unfinished and unclear without the player's investigation and interpretation. The story must be experienced by the player for the game's themes to come to life. Furthermore, the absence of traditional gameplay components like tasks or objectives in the game encourages the player to interact with it on a more emotional and reflective level. The game's emphasis on observation and exploration encourages players to think about their own experiences and feelings and to take an active role in the process of meaning-making. For instance, the player might stumble upon a painting of a bird flying over the sea in a cave. At first glance, this image might not seem important, but as the player advances through the game, they might run into other references to birds and flight. The player may start to piece together the symbolism of birds in the game and how it relates to the themes of grief, loss, and redemption through active participation and observation.

7 CONCLUSION OF THE THESIS

The gaming industry is a huge and vibrant one that has captivated the interest of millions of people worldwide. Numerous gaming subgenres exist, each with distinct gameplay elements and target demographics. In addition to spawning new industries like eSports and game streaming, the popularity of gaming has also influenced other forms of media like movies and television. Action, adventure, role-playing, sports, racing, strategy, and simulation are some of the most common game genres. Fast-paced action to immersive storytelling is all types of gameplay that are available in each of these genres. Additionally, a wide range of people can play games because they can be played on a variety of devices, including consoles, computers, and mobile ones.

Narrative in video games is a subject that has generated a lot of discussion among academics and enthusiasts. While Narratologists contend that a strong narrative connection is necessary for players to fully enjoy a game, Ludologists contend that the player experience is the most significant aspect of gaming. Both arguments are persuasive, and the choice ultimately comes down to the player's preferences and the game itself.

Ludologists and narratologists are two significant scholarly subfields in the field of game studies. Although these groups are not mutually exclusive, they frequently take a unique stance and give different gameplay elements priority. The player experience, according to Ludologists like Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth, is what matters most in video games. This point of view contends that games are distinct forms of media that demand the player's active engagement and participation rather than simply being interactive narratives. According to Juul, the player experience consists of the feelings that the game evokes as well as the social communities that form around gameplay. According to him, games are not just solitary endeavors but rather have the power to unite people and build communities around common interests and experiences. On the other hand, Aarseth is more focused on the game mechanics and rules. He contends that games are distinct forms of media that demand active engagement with the game's rules and mechanics, not just "texts" that can be analyzed like literature. He believes that games should be evaluated not just for their narrative content, but also for the ways in which they offer players distinctive experiences.

Narratologists are academics who contend that a compelling narrative experience and a strong narrative link are essential for players to fully enjoy a game. They are especially interested in a narrative components of video games. Marie-Laure Ryan, one of this group's

well-known academics, makes the case that the outdated literary analyses should be revised to take video games into account as narrative forms. Ryan makes the case that a narrative in video games is worth examining and contrasting with a narrative in books in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. The significance of Ryan's argument lies in its challenge to the conventional wisdom that video games are merely for entertainment and lack the complexity of more traditional narrative forms. She makes the case that because video games can have intricate and complex plots, academics should examine them similarly to other narrative forms. Although Ryan's method of game analysis is similar to that of traditional literary analysis, she acknowledges that games have special qualities that set them apart from conventional narratives, such as interactivity and immersion. Narratologists are attempting to demonstrate that narratives in video games can be just as compelling and significant as those in books. Although they acknowledge the value of player experience, they contend that in order for a player to fully engage with a game, there needs to be a compelling narrative connection. Narratologists are extending the study of literature to include new and developing forms of storytelling by examining games as narrative forms.

The selection of the game *Dear Esther* reveals an inclination in favor of Narratology. The game is renowned for its compelling narrative and playing it as a game is practically nonexistent because the player just wanders around the island. The analysis of the game emphasizes this even more. This game's importance for narratology is demonstrated by the main character, themes, order, and symbolism. For instance, Esther, the main character of the game, is a figurehead for the unachievable, much like Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. The order in which the player learns the story is essential to comprehending the narrative, and the themes of love, loss, and death are also prominent in the game. The game's complexity and significance are further increased by the island, lighthouse, and bird symbolism. All these factors imply that *Dear Esther* is the ideal illustration of a game that can be examined and comprehended using the perspective of narratology. Scholars can learn more about how video games can be used as a storytelling medium by examining the narrative structure of the game and the ways in which the player interacts with the story.

According to Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish's reader response theory, a text's meaning is not predetermined but rather is created by the reader through engagement with the text. This theory places a strong emphasis on the reader's subjectivity and how their interpretation of the text is shaped by their own experiences, worldviews, and cultural upbringing. When it comes

to video games, the player's active involvement is even more obvious because they are not only interpreting the text but also interacting with the game world and making choices that affect the story. This increases the applicability of reader response theory to games even further. A game's storyline can also significantly affect how the player experiences and perceives the game. For instance, in *Dear Esther*, the player is engrossed in a convoluted and enigmatic narrative that raises issues regarding identity, memory, and loss. The symbolic meaning of the island, the use of flashback scenes, and the enigmatic narrator's monologues all help to create a distinctive and captivating narrative experience. People can better understand how narrative components of a game affect the player's experience and interpretation by applying reader response theory to titles like *Dear Esther*. This can help us appreciate games as storytelling mediums that can be analyzed and studied similarly to traditional literature, in addition to interactive entertainment.

To fully appreciate the artistic and cultural value of games as a narrative medium, reader-response theory should be applied to video games like *Dear Esther*. People can learn more about the ways in which games can interact with and test their understanding of the world by investigating the player's experience and interpretation of the game.

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9 ANNOTATION

Jméno a příjmení: Štěpán Václavík

Fakulta: Filozofická

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ph.D. Elizabeth Allyn Woock.

Rok obhajoby: 2023

Název práce: Narrative in the game Dear Esther through the lenses of Reader-Response theory

Název práce v češtině: Vyprávění ve hře Dear Esther pohledem teorie Reader-Response

Anotace: Bakalářská práce se zabývá příběhovostí ve hrách. Představuje dvě skupiny vědců, kteří se zabývají touthle problematikou: Ludologie a Narratologie. Práce následně analyzuje hru Dear Esther, aby tím dokázala že literární analýza by se měla modernizovat pro nové medium her. Bakalářka také poukazuje, že jde aplikovat teorie Reader – Response na hry a tím chce upozornit, že hry by se měli brát vážně na stejné úrovni jako knížky.

Klíčová slova v angličtině: Ludology, Narratology, Reader - Response theory, narrative

Anotace v angličtině: The bachelor thesis deals with the issue of narrative in games. It introduces two groups of scientists, Ludology and Narratology, who deal with this issue. The thesis then analyzes the game Dear Esther to demonstrate that literary analysis should be modernized for new gaming media. The thesis also points out that reader-response theories can be applied to games, thus emphasizing that games should be taken seriously on the same level as books.

Klíčová slova v češtině: Narratologie, Ludologie, Reader – Response teorie, příběhovost

Rozsah práce: 49

Jazyk práce: Angličtina