Literary Spaces and the Aesthetics of Deprivation: Isolation and Textual Artefacts in *Dear Esther* (2012)

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Introduction

The dominance of narrative elements and a literary approach to the premise are present in several computer game genres, especially adventure and role-playing games based on detailed fictional universes. Walking simulators, a subgenre of adventure games, are unique in the sense that they rely mainly on exploration and environmental storytelling techniques in their gameplay. This paper argues that this recent genre lends itself to literary meaning creation and includes games which combine said exploratory elements with themes and devices adopted from literature. The novelty of literary walking simulators lies in establishing focus on the game text and the observation and interpretation of the fictional world through an absence of characters and a scarcity of typical game mechanics, i.e., a limited opportunity to interact with the environment and a minimalist user interface. In the object of this analysis, *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room), gameplay and character deprivation are also mirrored by the game narrative where vivid memories of absent characters and a lack of contact with the outside world are used extensively to exercise an aesthetic and emotional effect on the player. As the quintessential example of the genre, *Dear Esther*'s handling of the tropes of absence and deprivation has influenced later works such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Annapurna Interactive,) and *All the Delicate Duplicates* (Breeze and Campbell,). Those

who set out to discover these worlds are left alone with the script in an isolated microverse, where text as a medium often appears in a representational form to fill the void left by the departed inhabitants of the game space. In other words, *Dear Esther* has inspired creators through its signification which relies on various forms of omissions, making it a fascinating object from an aesthetic/phenomenological perspective. In what follows, an outline of the walking simulator genre, a brief overview of existing theories of literariness in computer games, as well as the notion of literary games as used here are provided. With this foundation, the subsequent analysis will illustrate how, situated at an intersection of electronic literature and games, these hybrids operate with literary elements which serve as a basis for their multimodal narration. To this end, this work combines a literary approach with a more comprehensive experiential account of the gameplay and its various building blocks including representational and ludic elements with a focus on the aforementioned themes.

The essence of games: terminological (re)considerations

The past decade saw the rise of a genre of exploration-based games that disable nearly all player interactions except for observation, movement, and often reading/listening to narrative. Walking simulators focus attention on the environment through which players can often reconstruct a narrative, making both the temporal and spatial dimension of the story world key elements of their gameplay. Although a tendency to take an even more minimalistic approach to gameplay and do away with the story can be observed in some cases (e.g. *Journey* (Thatgamecompany,); *Proteus* (Twisted Tree,); or *Chionophile* (Tonguç Bodur,)), when present, the story is accentuated through the lack of opponents and fail states, becoming the centre of the experience. The digital narratives

examined here defy classification as belonging to a single medium and are set in worlds with their own intermedial symbolism and intratextual webs of references.

Upon its emergence, the genre prompted researchers in the field of game studies to revisit the question of the role of narrative within the medium. This led to a renewed interest in the ontology of video games, especially the two-fold issue of whether games are defined by their ludic mechanics; and whether the tools of narratology are effective when applied to games (Koenitz 2). The long-standing prescriptivist approach to these questions is based on the view that a strict separation of various media and art forms is necessary for analytical purposes. However, advocates of this theory generally overlook the fact that games inherently defy such artificial categorisation, their experience being defined by intermediality and multimodality. These interrelated terms are applied to games in a complementary sense to account for both their construction and reception. Video games are considered intermedial as they incorporate elements from various sonic, visual, audio-visual, and textual media and art forms (e.g., soundtracks, graphics, cinematics, text inserts). Therefore, player experience is multimodal since it involves a variety of senses: sight, hearing, and (in the case of some controllers and virtual reality games) tactile sensations.

Consequently, "systematic" and especially video game-specific definitions of games often prove inadequate for the purposes of aesthetic analyses (Kirkpatrick 37) or overly restrictive for a phenomenon as varied as games (Parlett qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 71). This is also supported by the results of Salen and Zimmerman's comparison of definitions of the term "game" by fifteen prominent authors from the fields of philosophy, ludology, and game design. They conclude that, when enumerating key components of (analogue and digital) games, consensus between their outlined conditions only exists regarding the presence of rules (ibid. 79). Therefore, it might be helpful to go back to classic, general definitions of play and games (i.e., the rule-governed form of

play) (ibid. 72), to define an outlier case such as walking simulators which might not fit stricter definitions. Huizinga and Caillois, for example, do not specify a type of activity, mechanic, or even interaction as a prerequisite for gameness and instead look at games as phenomena characterised by their distinctness from everyday life. This at once implies the presence of a fictional element, on which they put direct emphasis (ibid.; Rodriguez). Caillois also establishes a category for games without much agency called "alea," where relinquishing control and resorting to fate is implied in the rules (Stampfl). Although he focuses mainly on games of chance, this definition is also applicable to walking simulators, where the goals are usually "enforced" and artistic expression is prioritised over player agency (Juul).

Furthermore, Caillois refuses to distinguish between cognitive and kinetic play in his conditions for categorising an activity as a game (Stampfl). Cognitive play is also the cornerstone of classic aesthetic theories postulated by Kant and subsequently Schiller, frequently cited by authors who characterise computer games as works of art (Kirkpatrick and Juul inter alia). According to the two German thinkers, aesthetic enjoyment consists in "free play" i.e., a cooperation between our reasoning and imagination (Kant 61-62; Hein 67). With regard to gaming, the primacy of mental play has been advocated by game designer Will Wright, who found that "the computer is just an incremental step, […] an intermediate model to the model in the player's head" (qtd. in Freyermuth et al. 174).

Concerning the role of game narratives, it has been proposed by many scholars that the controversy surrounding their role in games might be resolved by treating them as a phenomenon distinct from print fiction and specific to games (cf. Jenkins Salen and Zimmerman Schell). For Jenkins, this entails viewing game fictions as environments, while Schell describes them as "experiences," (qtd. in Freyermuth et al. 175). Considering that there is a significant overlap

between these two concepts, for the purposes of this paper, a combination of the two approaches is envisioned to support the phenomenological focus of the analysis. Therefore, this study builds on the assumption that the aesthetic analysis of video games implies the examination of the entire gameplay experience and the game world in a holistic manner rather than consisting of mere narrative biopsy (cf. Kirkpatrick 13; Wei et al. 2), which however does not exclude the possibility of a literary focus. In this way, "emergent" narratives called to life by the player's actions in more mechanic-heavy genres are not considered superior to "embedded" premises (Jenkins), typical of walking simulators in achieving immersion and eliciting a reaction from the player. Nevertheless, narrative is treated as a "gameplay function," or a Gibsonian "affordance" (Pinchbeck 4; 6) – one of the various modes games may employ to achieve this objective.

In a generic analysis, Montembeault proposes a topology of typical characteristics that can help define walking simulators as a phenomenon. The study argues that the genre uses combinations of five "modular clusters:" "[1] slow, solitary, and peaceful walking through post-traumatic codified space; [2] search for secrets among ruined places; [3][a] sense of fatalism and spectrality; [4][a] voyeuristic apprehension of everyday life; [5] first-person (dis)embodiment and ambiguous sense of identity" (6). While points 1, 2, and 4 describe the gameplay including the player's options and behaviours encouraged by the game system, 3 and 5 reflect on the representational side and typical overarching themes. The latter points provide several opportunities for literary expression and for supporting the ludic goal of solving riddles and uncovering secrets: play with language is a tool well-suited to the artistic expression of mystery and ambiguity – making it a possible artistic choice beside audio-visual and procedural means of achieving a similar effect. At the same time, as will be discussed in the section about the nature of literary games, the term "literary walking simulator" delineates an overlap between this genre and

games including literary elements, which predate walking simulators and are present across multiple genres. In their presentation, walking simulators draw inspiration from various media. These sources include the storytelling techniques of modernist cinema (Klamer) as well as post-modern literature – movements which favour fragmentation and emphasise subjective experiences. Furthermore, they borrow gameplay elements from other digital games from the horror, detective, and adventure genres, which also foreground the use of clues, atmospheric spaces and detailed fictional worlds. The following section will reveal how literary expression appears in games at large and why this genre has exceptional potential to accommodate it.

Towards a theory of literary walking simulators

To describe games of a literary nature, this paper draws mainly upon two theories: Espen Aarseth's notion of "cybertexts" and Astrid Ensslin's taxonomy of games as located on a "literary-ludic spectrum." The former refers to all (not just digital) texts, the interpretation of which entails a kinetic and/or cognitive challenge, such as the reconstruction of highly fragmented narratives (Aarseth 1). Literary walking simulators incorporate cognitive play and thus may be regarded as "cybertexts." Like Aarseth, Ensslin also focuses on the presence of literary features in computer games on the level of content rather than form. Excluding adaptations of print literature, she narrows the category down to original, standalone story worlds presented via literary techniques (32). Building on these theories, the concept of literary computer games employed here refers to examples incorporating a rich subtext, wordplay, symbolism, or other devices of indirect signification that are given a crucial role in the narrative, and thus contain multiple layers of meaning on the level of language. Literary games encourage players to strive for a close reading while simultaneously challenging them through a fragmented presentation of the plot and

subjective, unreliable narration. They tend to emphasise the artistic self-expression of the author and often include metafictional/metamedial elements.

This broad definition calls for a number of examples as to how literariness is implemented in game design. A common literary technique in computer games is the inclusion of interior monologues which serve to introduce the player to a given character's thought processes. In *Literary Gaming*, Ensslin analyses Act II of the horror game *The Path* (Tale of Tales), where we get written notes of the playable character's impressions in reaction to the environment as we walk around a forest (146). Similarly, adventure game *Heavy Rain* (Sony) gives the player the option to eavesdrop on the active character's thoughts at any point in time, unfiltered by relevance. Role-playing game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM) uses a dialogue box containing not only interactions between characters but also imagined conversations (sometimes with inanimate objects). What is more, the player also gets clues from the character's intuition and the content of their daydreams. In *Disco Elysium*, these pieces of information are presented using second-person address in a manner resembling 1980s text adventures. In the case of *Dear Esther*, the use of a writing style mimicking the free flow of the narrator's thoughts is combined with another link to literature: metatextual comments regarding the processes of fiction writing (relating to the author) and reading (referencing the experience of the player) alike. Literariness is therefore understood as a feature present in computer games across multiple genres.

Walking simulators often choose a more structured, mediated representation of the character's subjective consciousness. This is realised by means of recollections constituting 'autobiographic' writing, presented in the form of diaries, notes, or personal notebooks (e.g. in *What Remains of Edith Finch*; *Gone Home* (Fullbright); or *All the Delicate Duplicates*), or, in the case *of Dear Esther*, unsent letters. These more elaborate representations of the subject's mental

processes are more likely to employ literary devices such as symbols and motifs than the brief momentary impressions employed in other genres. Simultaneously, these longer passages often retain a fragmented, meandering quality to ensure a realistic representation of mental states such as doubt, confusion and anguish (befitting the "post-traumantic codified space" (Montembeault 6) often encountered in walking simulators). These clues (be they written or recorded) usually cannot be collected or revisited, demanding close and constant attention from the player. In a textual form, they may be depicted in a spatial manner, as overlays in the environment or attached to objects. Moreover, characters' emotional states are often reflected by the environment in the form of abandoned spaces in a state of disarray (*All the Delicate Duplicates*) or treacherous weather conditions (*What Remains of Edith Finch*; *Life is Strange* (Square Enix)), and in the game's musical score (*Dear Esther*). Walking simulators are especially suited for literary content because they eliminate the condition of continuous "optimisation" (Juul), thus leaving more room for interpretative play and deep attention to the fictional world. In other words, they address players seeking a focus on story exploration without having to part with the medium-specific experience only digital games can offer — of entering and inhabiting rather than just viewing or reading a story (Calleja qtd. in Engelfeldt-Nielsen et al. 206).

Having established the categories of literary games and walking simulators, the next step towards a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid forms is to define how their combinations work beyond their literary qualities. Literary walking simulators tend to be rather indexical in their conveyance of meaning. By prioritising the use of symbols and other semiotic devices in their representation (audio-visual and textual alike), creators often make the artistic choice to go back to the traditions of signification in games preceding the "hyperrealistic turn" (Freyermuth et al. 90) of the 1990s. This shift marked the beginning of a trend in game design to rely on more explicit

and realistic means of visual representation utilising semi-realistic and later photorealistic graphics.

As mentioned, literary walking simulators challenge the mental faculties of the player and scarcely require sophisticated motor skills. Accordingly, interaction in these instances is to be understood as a mental pursuit, where play happens on a cognitive level and involves the processes of aesthetic perception and interpretation. The conflict is between game and player and results from the game fiction itself: withholding information and giving cryptic or false clues serves to make the goal (typically the uncovering of secrets to reconstruct a narrative) more challenging. While the outcome is most often fixed, the intrinsic ambiguity of the story allows for multiple different conclusions.

In what follows, the spatial and temporal dimensions of *Dear Esther*'s game narrative will be examined and characterised as inseparable elements of an entity which might be considered the game's internal "chronotopos" (Bakhtin). The simple mechanic of moving forward in walking simulators is an integral part of reconstructing past events, which is frequently the main goal in the literary subtype. According to Carbo-Mascarell, this connection of walking as an aesthetic practice with free association and cognitive play has been present in both literature and philosophy since romanticism (1). Her assessment of walking simulators was also the first to employ Bachelard's theory of "topoanalysis, […] the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (Bachelard 8), to video games – an approach which also informed this paper. With regard to temporality, Bergson's thoughts on hallucinatory states and their relation to the present (Ansell-Pearson) as well as to absence and presence in a phenomenological sense (see also Sokolowski) will be invoked in the following analysis. That walking as a mechanism is suitable for storytelling purposes becomes evident from de Certeau's observation: "In Greek, narration is

called 'diagesis:' it establishes an itinerary (it guides) and it passes through (it 'transgresses')" (qtd. in Manovich 3). This combination of guided tours of spaces and stories lies at the core of the genre.

Dear Esther: an introduction

Dear Esther grew out of a research project on game narratives at the University of Portsmouth. Alongside its creation, writer and lead developer Dan Pinchbeck analysed a substantial corpus of first-person shooters (FPS) in his dissertation to prove the hypothesis that story was an aspect of gameplay which enabled creators to deliver a "complex experience" despite the simplicity of the game's infrastructure (Pinchbeck 5). Set in a semi-fictional location in the Hebrides, the game follows the path of a wanderer who arrives to an abandoned island after losing his beloved in a car crash supposedly caused by a drunk driver named Paul. During this last pilgrimage, he writes letters to the titular Esther, the fragments of which can be found scattered about the island in the form of audio recordings, complete with subtitles displaying entire paragraphs to help players follow the flow of the narrator's thoughts. The content of the passages does not always match a conventional letter format, instead, the narrator abruptly switches between a factual account of the journey, flashbacks and memories, and his subjective perceptions in a manner akin to stream-of-consciousness narration. Whether the player assumes the perspective of the narrator or merely follows in his footsteps, along with the question of whether the island is real or exists only in the imagination of the letters' author, remains ambiguous throughout the game. The passages contain intratextual references to a fictional book written by an explorer named Donnelly who had charted the island in the 1800s, a reading the narrator uses as a guide through the location. The characters mentioned in the letters include Esther, Paul, Donnelly, and two of the island's late inhabitants he

describes in his *historical* account; the lonesome shepherd Jakobson and a mysterious hermit. In the course of his wanderings, the narrator enters a hallucinatory state as a joint result of an injury he sustains while passing through the island's caves and the anaesthetics he takes, resulting in a perceived amalgamation of these characters' identities with his own. The main curiosity of the game's storytelling is an additional layer of narrative fragmentation achieved through the randomisation of the passages encountered by the player. At various trigger points, only one of two to four possible excerpts is read out, making the resulting interpretation slightly different upon each playthrough. Only at a limited number of locations is the player supplied the same snippet each time – these passages usually contain key information about character identities or the game's premise. *Dear Esther* has been subjected to multiple gameplay-based close readings (e.g. Carbo-Mascarell; O'Sullivan) and analyses of prominent themes such as its rich biblical references (Milton; Fabius), the island as a body (Nicolle), and the blurring of character identities (Colthup). Besides a shift in thematic focus, a novel feature of the present analysis is its use of the full script.[1] While focusing on the game narrative, the aesthetic/experiential approach used here also takes into consideration the intermediality and multimodality characteristic of video game representation. This is achieved by studying the themes of ellipsis, absence (and implied presence) on an audio-visual as well as textual level and the way they affect the player's perception of the temporal and spatial aspects of the game world and the story.

A synthesis of presence and absence in the game world

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[1] In the case of *Dear Esther*, quotes from the script are referred to according to their respective trigger points as named in Pinchbeck's notes (2013) rather than by chapter title for added accuracy.

Owing to the setting, the characters appear for the player only through the narrator's recollections. In *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Sokolowski calls this an "empty intention" where the object of our perception is not physically present (33). Most prominently, despite being out of the narrator's reach, Esther remains the central character of the underlying narrative, sewn into the fabric of the game on all levels of representation. The narrator uses the island as a "time capsule" (secondbeach a) to immortalise Esther's story in artistic ways: the walls of the caves are covered in fluorescent paintings which symbolise his trauma, and biblical quotes which play on a parallel between the crash and the story of Paul's conversion (the connection being the motif of the sight of a bright light). In resorting to these devices, he invokes the ancient literary trope of assuring the proliferation of a person through the power of stories and artworks. On the shore we find the letters themselves, folded into paper boats in a symbolic gesture of acquiescence – messengers doomed by their forlorn sender to float idly along the shore and sink without ever fulfilling their purpose (lostbeach). This location serves as the scene of the most cathartic moments of the player's experience, where the effect of this discovery (i.e., the revealing of the origin of the snippets) is amplified by the symbolic development of the depicted emotions. The narrator's gradual acceptance of the events of the past can be seen as an implied meta-ludic comment on the players' assumed agreement to relinquish control and follow a predefined path throughout their traversal.

> From here I can see my armada. I collected all the letters I'd ever meant to send to you, if I'd have ever made it to the mainland but had instead collected at the bottom of my rucksack, and I spread them out along the lost beach. Then I took each and every one and I folded them into boats. I folded you into the creases and then, as the sun was setting, I set the fleet to sail. Shattered into twenty-one pieces, I consigned you to the Atlantic, and I sat here until I'd watched all of you sink
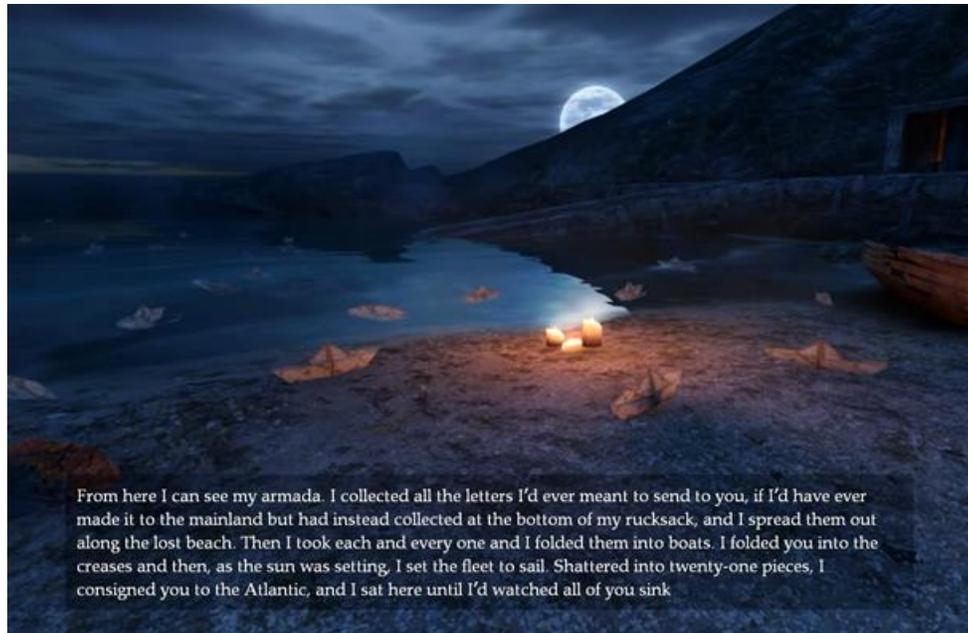
Fig. 1. The narrator's letters folded into paper boats in *Dear Esther* chapter "The Beacon," PC, The Chinese Room, 2012. Retrieved: 5 April 2021.

As we might notice at an early stage of the journey, the endless waters surrounding the island are uninhabited apart from the paper boats and the wreck of a ship. However, the recordings reference the lights of ships on the horizon "[fugueing] into ambiguity" (firstbeach a), a feature which does not appear on a visual level. O'Sullivan associates this element of absence with the sublime (317), yet the notion is also used by phenomenology to refer to the effect of such ellipses on our perception. Thus, the significance of the game text is emphasised as the most exhaustive source of subjective impressions, while the illustrations and the environment merely complement these. Were the player to find a different passage while walking this beach, the "fugue" of the ships describing the narrator's mental state (northpath b) would not be a part of their experience. With each passage we encounter, we are also reminded of the absence of other possible clues implied in their presence. Since an element of choice is not present, much like in some hypertext works with randomised passages such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, the takeaway from our traversal

is always determined by chance. In this story-within-a-story, the linearity of the route (the "straight line to the summit" (lowervalley 02 c)) appears to be in a paradoxical relationship with this form of narrative fragmentation. In a metatextual note, players are subtly instructed to return repeatedly to overcome this interpretative challenge (jetty a), a requirement which makes the game "a museum shut to all but the most devoted" (hermit d). The resulting circularity in the gameplay experience makes Pias' theory of the player's *déjà vu* induced by the pre-established routes characteristic of video game spaces (91) apply in a literal sense, as we "[lose] control of how many visits [we] have made," (jetty c) much like the narrator before us.

The encouragement to walk these paths repeatedly is contradicted by another assessment of the letters, where the narrator refers to them as a deterrent for those "bound to follow" (valleyreturn d):

> When someone had died or was dying or was so ill they gave up what little hope they could sacrifice, they cut parallel lines into the cliff, exposing the white chalk beneath. With the right eyes you could see them from the mainland or the fishing boats and know to send aid or impose a cordon of protection, and wait a generation until whatever pestilence stalked the cliff paths died along with its hosts. *My lines* are just for this: to keep any would-be rescuers at bay. (whitelines, my emphasis)

By comparing his "lines" to those carved into the stones, he presents the player with one of the first links between the text and the environment, which becomes a characteristic narrative device later. The "uneasy permanence" (valleyreturn a) of the island's abandoned buildings, for example, symbolises the omnipresence of the story within the game world.

While the writer often refers to the game as a "ghost story" (cf. Pinchbeck 51; Pinchbeck qtd. in Biessener), the ghosts we might notice on the periphery of our field of vision are indexical references that symbolise the events of the past seeping into the game's present as the increasing delirium of the narrator spreads to the playable character. Kirkpatrick characterises games as

aesthetic objects where meaning creation and mechanics rely equally on "allegories" about death (162). In most computer games, this link is manifest in the ubiquitous role of fail states, respawning, and the resulting need to replay certain sequences in order to make progress. This recourse from the nether realm, which he regards as a mere "appearing to appear" (188), is referenced directly in *Dear Esther* through the elusive entities of the ghosts, an aesthetic technique where characters previously only referenced by the game text are visualised in a liminal state between absence and presence. The telling line by *Esther's* narrator towards the ending, "goodbye to the phenomenal, goodbye to the tangible" (ascent1 a) emphasises the importance of this sense of liminality in the game's representation both in terms of aesthetics and signification.

Spatio-temporal storytelling techniques

The game space in *Dear Esther* resembles environments known from first-person shooters[2] and might give the player the deceptive impression of an open world at a first glance. However, it is soon revealed the confines of the virtual world are determined by the trigger points marking the audio recordings of passages from the letters, creating a connection between the story space, the past events described in the letters, and the direction in which the player is ushered by the game. Beyond the simple navigability of the path, we must resort to a minimal form of guidance in the light of the radio mast which dominates the landscape and the implied entity of the narrator who is in a pars-pro-toto relationship with the game world and an intermediary of its creators. The island is established as a literary space already in the first chapter through the narrator's rhetorical question about the shepherds that had once inhabited the area: "I wonder, did they *assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses*, marking the geography with a *superimposed significance*; that

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[2] The first version of the game was a modification of the shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004).

they could actually *walk the bible and inhabit its contradictions*?" (valleytop a, my emphasis). In this sentence, the text and the virtual environment are juxtaposed in two ways: the poetic significance of certain locations is combined with the inhabitability (cf. de Certeau's reception theory)[3] and the "contradictory" nature of the biblical parallel embedded in the game's narrative. The passage refers indirectly to the narrator's objectives in devising the reader's experience when writing the letters, and at once to the central idea of the game, the inseparability of the story and the act of traversal.

Before we learn about the exact destination, we are led to believe that we are following the traces of this missing, ephemeral guide. This is most apparent when entering the caves: towards the exit, we find freshly lit candles although the environment at large would suggest that the island has been uninhabited for an extended period of time. In his comments disguised as a monologue, the narrator points out these (valleyreturn d) and other objects (emergence c) which qualify as sources of "richly interpretable information" (Biederman and Vessel qtd. in Carbo-Mascarell 5) and have the potential to confuse the player's time perception. His small anachronisms and non-sequiturs seemingly addressed to an "invisible audience" (Pinchbeck) fuse the timeline of the letters with the player's "here-and-now" (Juul qtd. In Hanson 4) constituting a peculiar sense of time. While play at large implies continually adjusting our expectations as games have the ability to constantly remind us or being outside of everyday reality (Rodriguez), literary walking simulators use stories and language to emphasise that we are outside the realm of computer games in a narrower sense.

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[3] In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau describes the reading experience as a "play of spaces" where the reader is transported into the narrative space of the literary text (1984: xxi).

One of the game's multiple embedded memorials, an underwater mirage which the player finds on the bottom of a lake within the cave is prefaced by the note that "the whole island is underwater" (river b). The state of being submerged in water is used to hint at dream-like spaces, suggesting that the entire journey is "half-imagined" (toppath a). This impression is underlined when we re-emerge on the opposite side of the map and enter an in-game memorial assembled from mementos of the traumatic accident, supporting the interpretation that the entire location is a mental space and that we might be traversing the narrator's thoughts. This echoes Bachelard's depiction of the psyche as a set of intimate spaces, a concept also embraced by walking simulators set in closed private locations such as family homes (e.g. *Gone Home*, *All the Delicate Duplicates*). The past is evoked in the form of memories contained in these locations, resulting in an intersection of the spatial and temporal dimensions of the game and creating the "virtual time-space continuum" which makes digital games a unique medium. Together with Bergson's idea that hallucinatory states of mind always "consist in the presence [...] of something" (Ansell-Pearson 71), the fine line between the real and the imagined, the present and the absent defines the fictional world of *Dear Esther* and is deeply connected to the game's representation of time and space.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard uses underground structures to describe the "irrational" (18) side of our thought processes. *Dear Esther*'s caves are the site of the narrator's blurred visions, yet we also encounter revelations about the meaning behind some of the earlier, cryptic references he weaves into his recollections. This stage of "collapsing symbols," which Pinchbeck regards as a key element of the game, is directly connected to the caves serving as the location of the third chapter: "you were all the world like a beach to me, laid out for investigation, your *geography* telling one story, but hinting at *the geology* hidden behind the cuts and bruises" (secondbeach c, my emphasis). This passage describes that subtextual information about the snippets we find on

the surface (the "geography") is revealed underground, within the "geology" of the game, using spatial terms to symbolise levels of meaning in the text.

Beyond this point, unlike the player, the narrator can no longer rely on his travel companion:

> Donnelly did not pass through the caves. From here on in, his guidance, unreliable as it is, is gone from me. I understand now that *it is between the two of us*, and whatever *correspondence* can be drawn from the wet rocks. (tunnel c, my emphasis)

This obscure comment may refer to his one-sided "correspondence" with Esther or the remainder of the way *accompanied* only by the player. At the same time, the goal of the game is finally revealed as his last symbolic attempt at establishing contact with society by "transmitting the story of Esther's death to the world" (Pinchbeck) by jumping to his death from the radio mast. His determination results in a tension which he senses in the atmosphere as "the foliage [becomes] all static, like a radio signal returning from another star" (goatshed a). The futility of his mission and that this "signal" cannot travel beyond the confines of the island, however, are foreshadowed in his description of the stones as "muted and lame" (wreck c). In his notes to the translators, the game writer hints at the parallel between this act of symbolic communicational failure and the effect the script aims to achieve, where confusion, ambiguity and the arbitrary bending of the rules of grammar to imitate faulty radio transmissions are of central importance (Pinchbeck). Moreover, not being able to contact the outside world also references the spatial limits inherent in all games.

The most notable instance of the merging of the timelines of the player and narrator occurs when entering the caves in the third chapter. While the game mostly relies on the player's perspective and only includes an abysmal number of scripted events, these are usually connected to joint experiences the player "re-enacts" (e.g. a vision induced by the lack of oxygen in an

underground lake). At the trigger point "caves entrance," the narrator's recollections of accidentally falling down a shaft and sustaining life-threatening injuries are followed by a cut scene where we witness the fall from a first-person perspective. The importance of this passage is signified by the fact that it is played invariably during every playthrough. The narrator, always removed and absent, fades into the player in a haunting collision where their plains of existence are momentarily unified in space and time. This scene encapsulates *Dear Esther*'s gameplay, demanding complete investment in the story and immersion in the exploratory process.

These allusions to the letters and the book together with the game's inclusion of a rich symbolism on the level of representation underscore the crucial role of textual forms in the player's experience. Nevertheless, the potential for a literary symbiosis stems from the multimodal nature of the signification of computer games enabling them to accommodate and uphold nuances of the text by treating it as part and parcel of the virtual world rather than a supplementary element. Literary walking simulators call for a player "with the right eyes" (toppath a): a "seeker" (Bateman) willing to both enter and reconstruct the narrative. In *Dear Esther*, the thematised subtextuality, absence, and ellipses serve as the ontological basis for the action. Ultimately, Iser's idea of the interpretation of literary works (i.e., the crucial role the reader plays in bringing the text to life) can be applied to literary games since the player is invited to contribute to the creative process (279) resulting in one of the endless variants of the game's narrative.

Conclusion

Following the heyday of electronic literature, many critics were concerned that "the word would eventually get lost" in the ever-growing repertoire of digital art (O'Sullivan). However, in light of this analysis, we may conclude that literary walking simulators strive for a delicate balance in

expression between intermediality and a literary foundation, assuring that while the experience of the game is multifaceted, the text and the story always gleam through the superimposed layers of various modalities. To demonstrate this, the literary, aesthetic, and ludic representations of absence, quasi-presence and desolation were examined in *Dear Esther*, a game in the vanguard of its genre. While displaying the generic features of using partially imagined spaces, a traumatic premise, and an air of mystery to exercise their effect on the explorer, the game includes novel strategies for assigning an aesthetic function to the text and making it a central artefact of the story world. Rather than trying to impose the point of view of literary narratology as the only tool for examining narratives, this paper sought to demonstrate the roles of player experience and game text in constructing the literary and aesthetic aspects of *Dear Esther* and similar walking simulators. It has been argued that interactivity is not merely a kinetic feature in games: a possible contribution of literary studies to the discourse of video games is reiterating that games often also function as cognitive interfaces with an interpretive dimension. Possible directions for future research on the topic include the proliferation and advancement of these generic practices in view of upcoming (both artistic and technological) developments within the subgenre.

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