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Dear Esther – Seeing *White Noise*

Created by The Chinese Room, *Dear Esther* is an interactive experience which seems to challenge identification. Proudly displayed on their website, the developers state that *Esther* is "driven by story and immersion, rather than traditional mechanics" (1). Eschewing the standard combat-driven focus of most games, this work instead acts as a nonviolent storytelling tool. While traversing a static island, the player gets told bits of the narrative in a semi-random order, giving the fixed setting a dynamic tale. Due to its divergent nature, *Dear Esther* finds a place in almost any debate of the literary and narrative merit of the gaming medium, since it famously curbs the traditions of games to embrace those of novels. However, the tools used to analyze, define, and discuss literature have found an uneven record when applied to games. The almost circular treatment of literature being works that can hold up to and welcome scholarly study doesn't translate to medium requiring new techniques. Primarily using *Dear Esther* and *White Noise*, this paper will explore how narrative stylings, visual reliance, inherent randomness, personalized experiences, and a lack of analytical tools currently hold games from a literary classification. Yet, a lack of tools or the literary label shouldn't hold back the medium of games from ongoing study.

White Noise serves as a sort of foil to *Dear Esther*. Both are postmodern narratives with nonstandard delivery. *White Noise* exaggerates points of daily life,

slowly escalating over the course of the novel, culminating in a seemingly random "toxic event." However, it then continuous past that incident, lingering on the after effects and family relationships after the main character, Jack Gladney, is told he's going to die. The Chinese Room's work focus almost entirely on the events after trauma, yet never clarifies what caused the game's starting situation. Both works use and emphasize recurring imagery. *Dear Esther* uses the likes of alcohol, phrases from Act, and electrical diagrams, creating its own form of visual memes similar to *White Noise's* usage of Hitler, SIMUVAC, and television. However, DeLillo's work has gathered a scholarly following, while *Dear Esther* lingers in a form of literary limbo.

Part of the issue comes down to the current colloquial definition of literature not being conducive to interactive structure. Literary studies consistently take out the reader, replacing that viewpoint with one of critique and analysis, breaking down every timber of elements like *White Noise's* "The Most Photographed Barn" for the basest hints of intertextuality and connections. Games, on the other hand, necessitate interaction and an improvisational interpreter, as the more visual medium requires a different type of delivery – when given ownership of a camera, few people consider it enjoyable to be whipped around by the lens. Whereas novels take the reader along for a ride, even the most linear of games must account for the user. It's not that the idea of literature is narrow or flawed, it's that it doesn't supply an apt language or methodology to discuss and critique the new media.

Even in *White Noise,* a book where the first half is practically a slice-of-life sitcom, DeLillo doesn't state every time Jack Gladney goes to the office. Location jumps between chapters and pages make sense in novels, and are accepted means of

removing minutia from a story. For games, sudden jumps in position would be jarring at best, due to the amount of control the player gets given. *Dear Esther* highlights this problem in trying to balance a slow walking pace with location based narrative delivery cues. To fill the dead air between expositions, The Chinese Room uses visual information. Reading about every car Gladney passes on the way to work might get obnoxious, but experiencing the recurring scrawls and scratches in the caves of *Esther* forms a more personal experience. Similar to how elements such as technology and computer usage builds throughout DeLillo's work, paintings in *Esther* become gradually more prominent, building on the visual motif as the narrator comes closer to the end of his trip on the island. From the first building, *Esther* lays the groundwork for its visual storytelling. Some symbols might not be clear and require outside references, but at the very basic level they show the efforts of a rambling mind trying to form connections (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4). This delivery syncs with the player's experience, as it shows the luminescent symbols at its most extreme when the narrator delivers the most revealing information. The personal experience afforded by interactivity compliments the gaps in narration, in a way that doesn't have a similar method in written works.

Juxtaposed with the independent visuals, *Esther* also relies on the accounts on multiple characters, which are heavy on imagery, allusions and metaphors over direct phrases. It gets more compelling when statements disagree or the narrator slips between personas, but intentionally avoids bringing them together, leaving room for interpretation. Silence from the narrator can be used as time for the player to deconstruct these statements, an ability novels can't have while keeping the reader

turning pages. Ignoring the quieter moments, this structure echoes the unreliable narrator, a device familiar to literature, but pawns off some in-story responsibility to the player. It presents an experience almost alien to conventional literary studies and definitions – the usage of more personal anecdotes in critique are rare, but are almost a necessity in an interactive experience.

For additional complications, *Dear Esther* prevents retreading of its grounds. By removing any in game recollection tools analogous to flipping back through a book to remember a quote, it removes a vital tool to connect the pieces. The narrative, as experienced through the game, instead hinges on memory – a relevant theme for sure, but not one that helps deliver a narrative. When combined with elongated metaphors, significant time in between passages, and swapping perspectives (but still relying on the same pronouns), it becomes almost impenetrably vague. This problem remains prevalent even across more traditional games, who feature level reselection and checkpoints but still lack the means to return to specific narrative beats. The limited ways for studies to function are taking pictures of any element of considered importance, losing visual information, or film it. Both of these sacrifice the interactive element for a standardized record similar to referring to and annotating written texts.

The recollection problem wouldn't be as bad if it weren't for interactivity. A novel or book could get destroyed, but then rewritten with few changes. Each game experience is uniquely separate – even scripted puzzles offer different situations depending on player memory. If the records of a play through are lost, it will likely never be replicated. *Dear Esther*'s narrative delivery highlights this problem – by speaking random passages, it ensures almost no two players will have the same story in a single

run. Despite being in the same location, any two plays of the game will almost definitely experience different dialogue. Due to this nature, characters (such as Lot's wife) might never be mentioned (Figure 5, Figure 6). Tonal shifts are also prevalent the starting landing might have "I've lost track of how long I've been [on the island]," which shifts the story from a possible shipwreck to a state of limbo. However, it gets randomly presented within seconds of the game starting (Figure 7, Figure 8). Mutually beneficial passages, such as the character explorations of Donnelly possibly present when descending the cliff behind the bothy, become mutually exclusive, competing for the same audio trigger (Figure 9, Figure 10). Attempting to reset dialogue on a future play almost always requires multiple tries, since unlike the pages of a book, the presentation and timing becomes arbitrary.

The Stanley Parable, another game whose main mechanic is walking and exploring a setting (now a drab office building) as a narrator delivers a piecemeal story addresses this problem in a unique way. The narrative unfolds with player choices, making it seemingly reactive and a personal story. However, each checkpoint and individual decision receives the same dialogue – any reader can experience and return to the same segments. Yet, it requires the player to actively pursue the side paths and challenge the narrator's explanation for the world. The interactivity presents a strong component of the experience, with the narrator seemingly having a new comeback at any situation, but it hides a limited number of set responses. This allows it to more easily be "read" through traditional means, but also makes it a more standard experience – dynamic elements are replaced with a clever but controlled script. Where

Dear Esther sacrifices consistency for delivery, *Stanley Parable* relies on that same steadiness for its experience.

Individual elements can still be studied and isolated from the inherent chance of the medium, but larger narrative and thematic study is prone to issues and wide divergences based on a writer's experience. If people studying given games get assigned a "correct" method to play and a walkthrough, the unique offerings of these interactivity get glossed over. Despite any guide, randomness like *Dear Esther's* delivery can only be "fixed" by directly modifying the work itself. An alternative would be the worst type of symbol mongering – assuming every present element remains relevant, purely due to the constraints of ever changing context. Whereas traditional literature can be studied and read with established methods, the correct way to "read" games requires a new approach, yet to be made.

One type of "reading method" is best represented through a conversation around the surprisingly narrative focused modern military shooter *Spec Ops: The Line.* In his article *The Time You Were an A-hole in Spec Ops: The Line* for online magazine *The Escapist*, Ed Smith explores and defines a specific way to play the game. Instead of encouraging players to take cover, he claims that the best experience comes from embracing every action hero stereotype, charging forward and leaving a quite literal blood trail. This type of behavior enforces the game's later anti-war messages and the exploration of how far players will go trying to reach a conclusion. Near the end, he says "all of this [imagery] is . . . much more powerful if you make a genuine, concerted effort to condense all that negative war shooter behavior into *Spec Ops*" (2). The player takes a more active role to replace the lack of inner monologues or explicit exposition of

text, but in doing so creates a more exhaustive representation of the themes. It gives a grounds for creating a common experience and contributing to a dialogue – by playing the game in the most violent way, the player's actions enhance the narrative message and delivery.

While this type of baseline might not be as applicable for more choice-driven games, it still presents a type of direction. Similar to *No Fear Shakespeare* or the plethora of guides on "how to read literature," Smith's article allows for a common discussion and experience despite a dynamic and variable presentation. Like the sloped hills and caves *of Dear Esther* funneling players down set paths, a rough outline can make analysis and textual exploration easier. By having this base, *The Line* becomes more open to study through traditional literary means. Fewer concessions have to be made for possibly diverse experiences, and minor differences become analogous to an actor's delivery or a mental picture of a passage. It doesn't remove the interactivity, but instead reframes it.

While Smith's article has a more conversational tone, it occupies a similar space to Leonard Orr's academically styled "White Noise: A Reader's Guide." Both seek to frame conversation around a nontraditional work, either by pointing out thematic trends, imagery, or giving backstory to the author's frame of mind. Even the edition matters, as Orr advises "the reader with a more scholarly, critical interest" to read the Osteen version of *White Noise* (74). This instruction seems similar to those posed by Smith – reading a specific version allows thematic elements to stand out more in the original text. As the back cover posits, the Continuum Contemporaries "aim . . . to provide accessible and informative introductions to the . . . most acclaimed and . . . influential

novels of recent years" (back cover). An entire series of publications exists to explain other publications to the audience. While not every reader of *White Noise* reads Orr's companion, it does help establish a base way of reading and reference of connections. At the same time both Orr and Smith modify possible authorial intentions, in order to deliver a more "enhanced" experience.

However, there's no Rosetta stone to explain human volition across thoughts, written works, and a joystick. Games have a closer sibling in the classification of film, whose creators and studiers no longer focus on making literary studies accept it. Instead, films have a form of partnership – adaptation is common, and the medium is open to study, but with its own language, styles, and canon. Yet, films managed this over an extended period of time. Classic films can easily be revisited, and said to remain relevant. Framing techniques of the fifties can still be seen influencing modern camera crews. Games haven't had that luxury. While camera technology evolved fairly slowly, games jump between technologies, adapting even during development. Each new wave of graphics cards and processors allows more features, ever more realistic environments, and more breathing room for narrative elements to grow. Still in its youth, the medium of games hasn't had time to construct and define a canon or list of agreed upon mechanical classics, much less narrative ones. As games continue to stay relevant and people look to them more for meaning, the study techniques and verbiage should grow, allowing critique and classification like literature, even if it's under a different label.

Dear Esther is an important game. It changed the way game modifications were explored, and opened new doors for interactive narratives. It circumvented tradition, but

in doing so sacrificed much of what makes its medium unique. As an historical and important piece of games and narratives it status is well earned, but the door to literature remains barred. Yet, as shown by the studies of film and comics, literary acceptance doesn't define cultural or scholarly importance. In time, games may hopefully be accepted and placed alongside *Hamlet* and *Watchmen,* but that doesn't mean they should be ignored now. Despite offering similar narrative conventions to those of the canon, each component of *Dear Esther* seems just slightly off of literary expectations. These "shortcomings" aren't problems of *Esther,* but inherent elements that divide games from other works. As the tools to analyze interactive experiences grow and form, this may change. But the current academic study and pursuit of literature runs counter to that which makes games valuable. Even if it may stumble in its climb to a literary aerial, *Dear Esther* still presents a new type of narrative, a beacon for others to move towards. It doesn't need an official spot on the Oxford digitized shelf or to conform to accepted means of study, it needs other games to redefine narrative interactions as they help define and produce a new scholarly vocabulary.

Figures 1-4: Paintings throughout *Dear Esther*

Figure 1

The first painting that can be found, located in the initial house seen at the opening.

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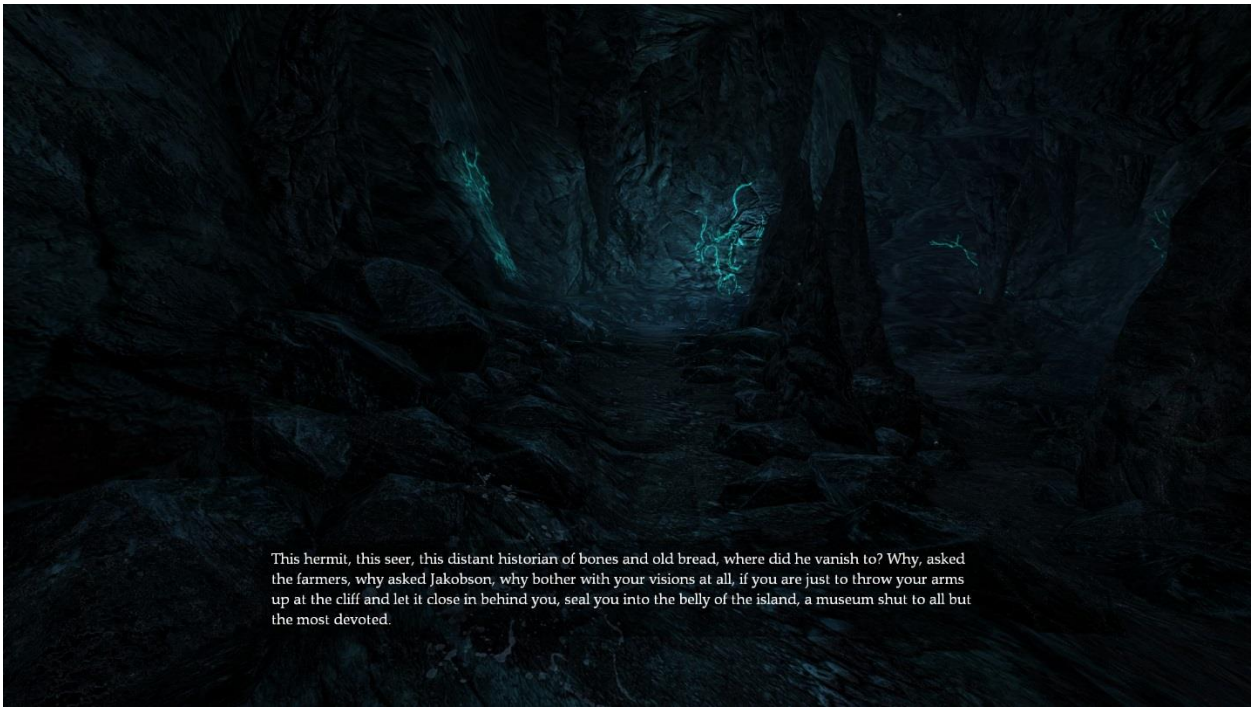
Figure 2



The early seaside cove featuring multiple drawings, evenly spaced within the interior.

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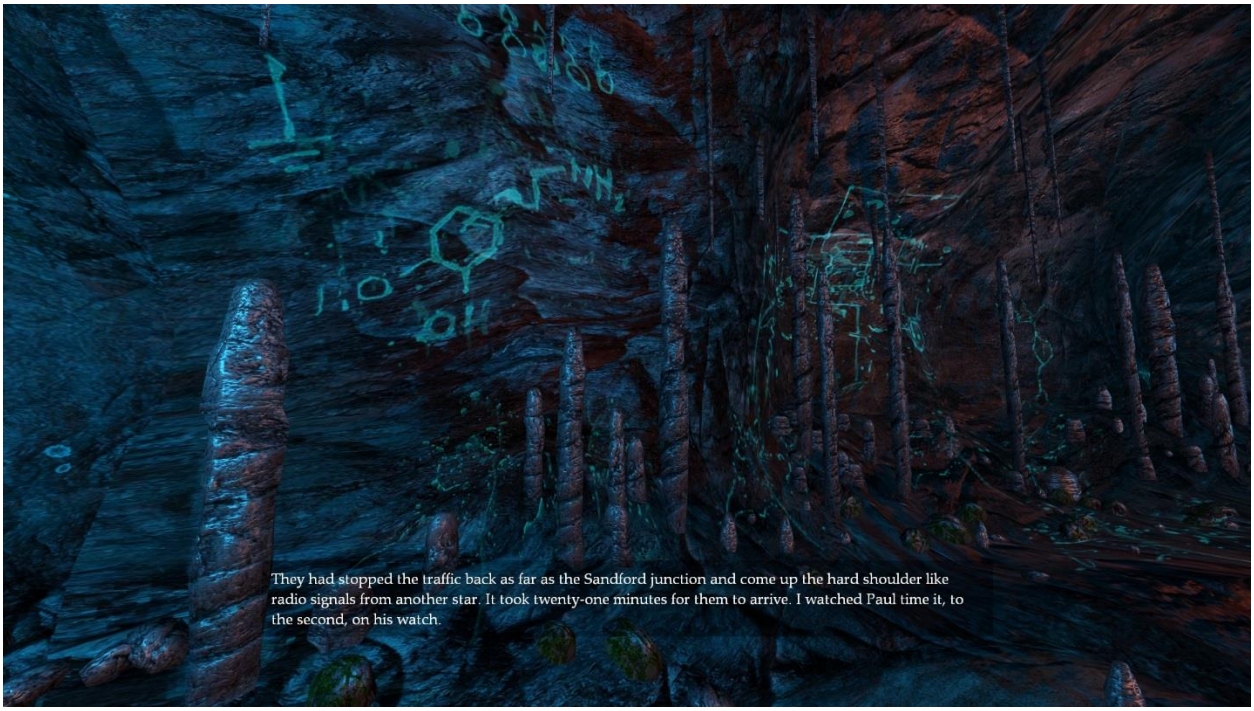
Figure 3



After falling down a cavern, a brief offshoot from the main passage presents the player a room where the writing covers almost every surface.

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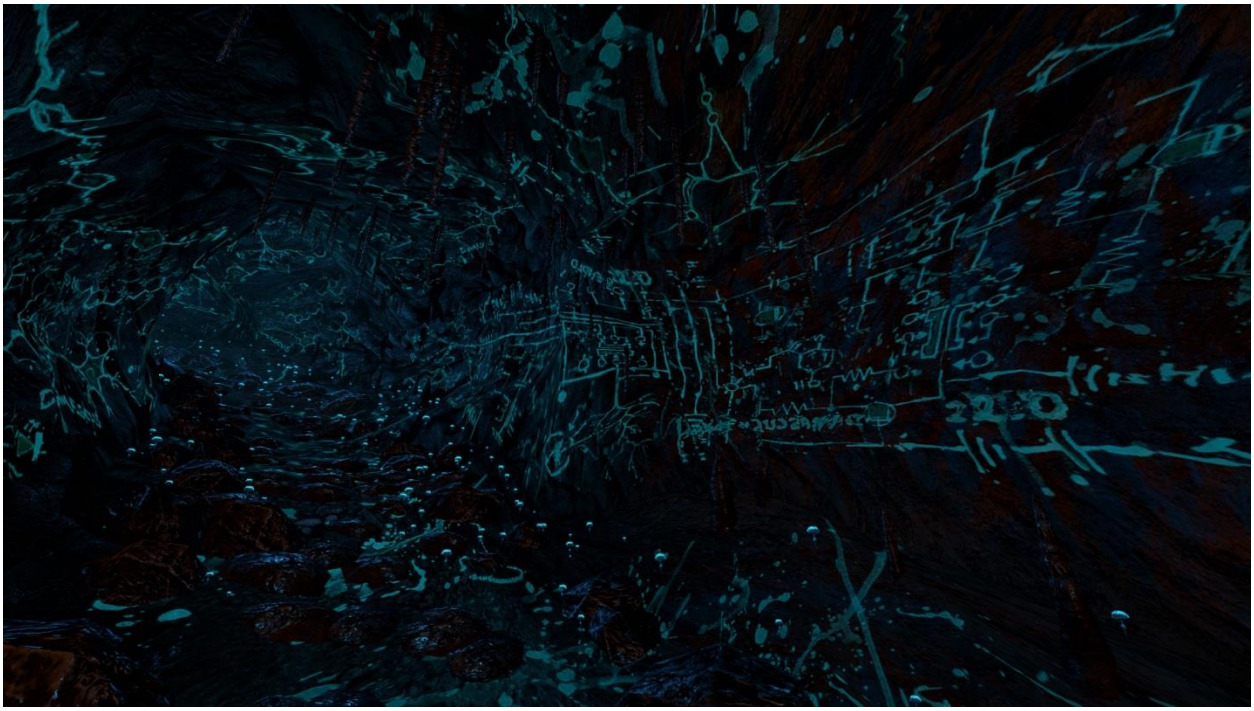
Figure 4



The ascent from the caves features a corridor covered in the luminescent works. Diagrams overlap, and chemical symbols blur, but each component can be recognized when focused on from earlier elements from the game.

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Differing dialogue in *Dear Esther*

Figures 5-6: The Hole

Figure 5

Upon seeing the large pit, the narrator becomes unsettled.

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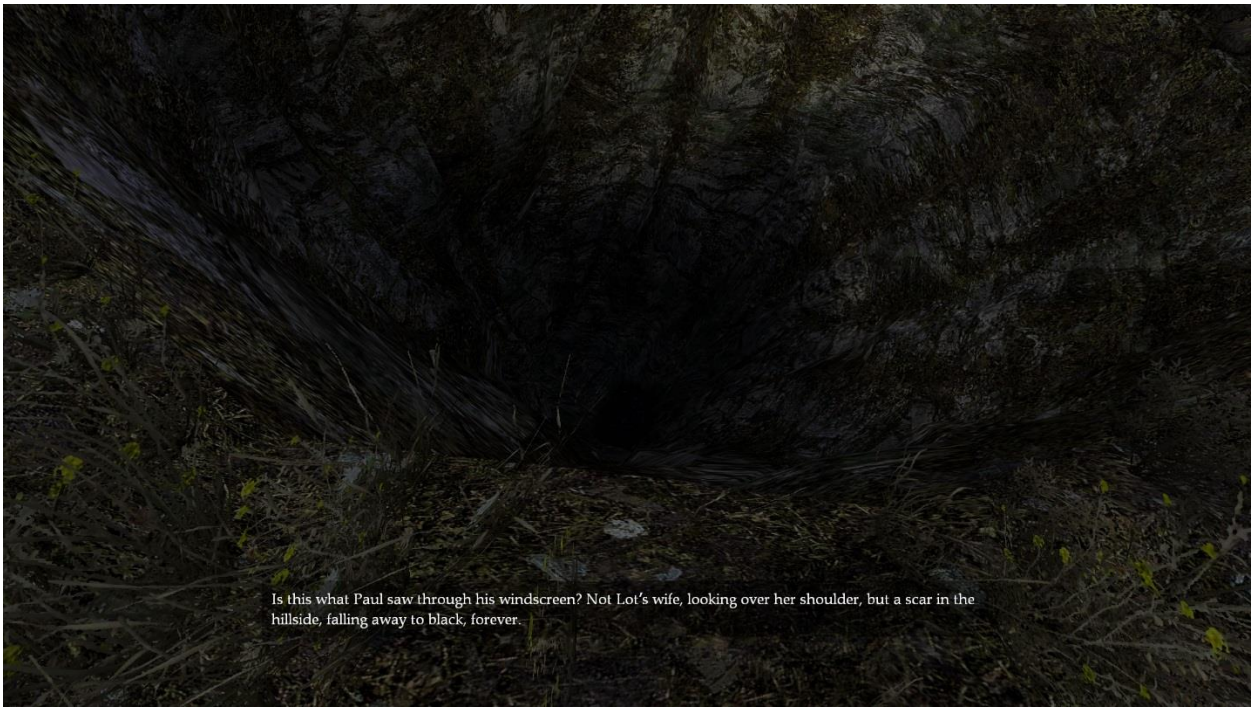
Figure 6



When seeing it this time, the narrator brings up two characters and the recurring car imagery.

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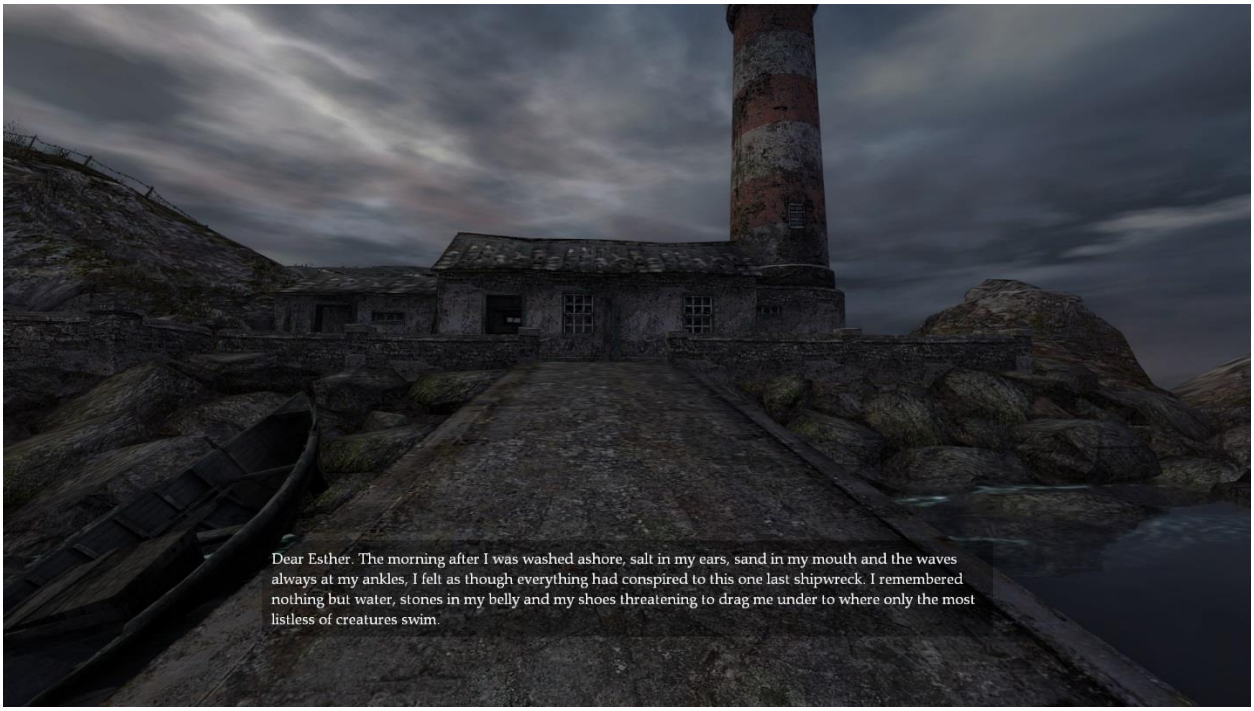
Figures 7-8: The opening lighthouse

Figure 7



The narrator opens the game by talking about his experiences arriving at the island. He seems to experience memory loss, pain from kidney stones, and sees his experience as a shipwreck.

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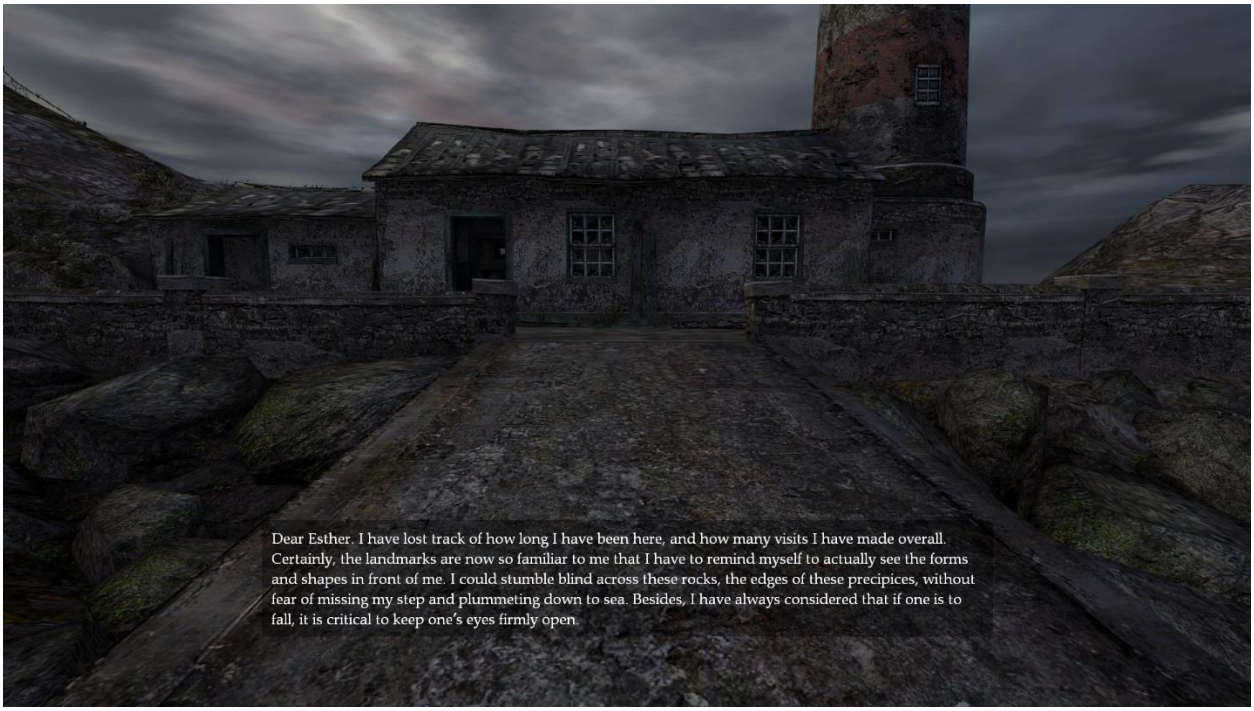
Figure 8



On this opening, the narrator recalls visiting the island repeatedly, for extended times.

He seems intimately familiar with the island, contrasting the opening in figure 7.

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Figures 9-10: The cliff

Figure 9

The narrator mentions Donnelly by name, establishing his medical problems and repeating the car crash, engine, and alcohol imagery.

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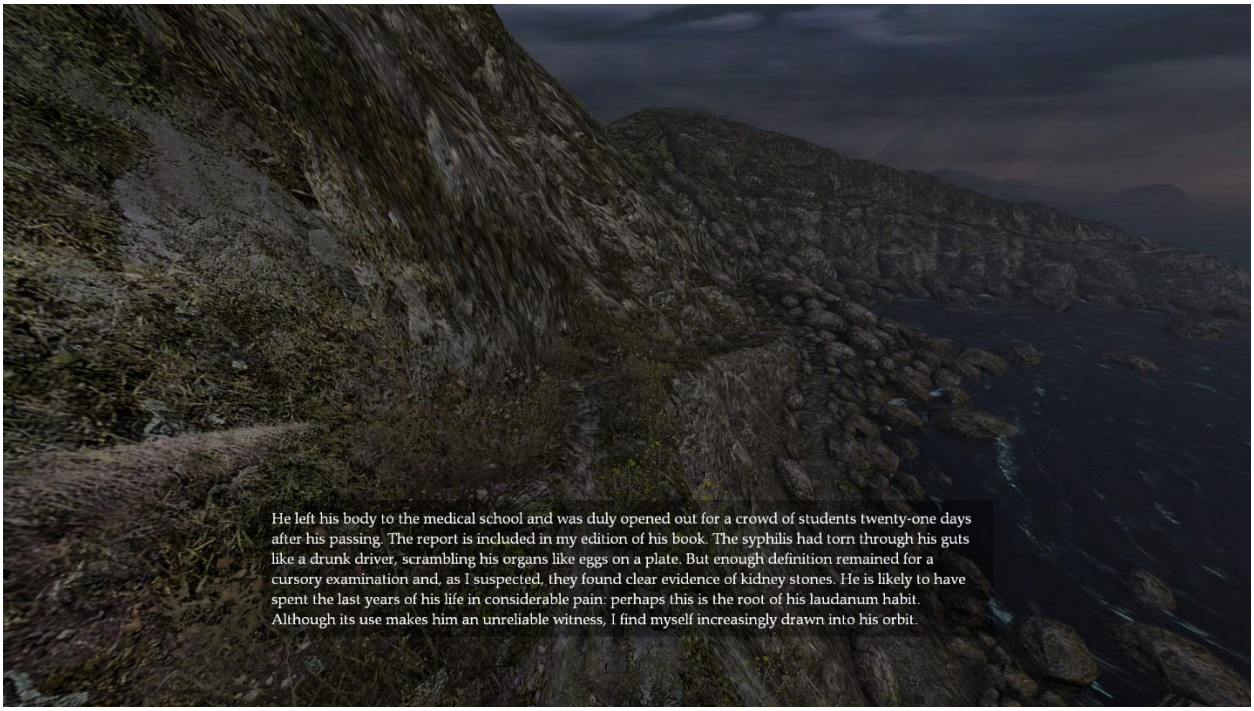
Figure 10



In this context, Donnelly was not mentioned by name, but his book is expanded upon. The narrator reveals both he and Donnelly suffered from kidney stones, and that Donnelly had a drug edition, echoing the narrator's obsession with alcohol.

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