I Will Abandon This Body and Take to the Air: The Suicide at the Heart of Dear Esther

> *Dear Esther. I am on a stone Jetty, the sun is setting, and I am alone on this*
> *island. I cannot interact with anything: all I can do is walk, look, and listen.*
> *As I walk, I hear a voice speak, reading fragments of letters to you. It*
> *becomes clear, as I listen to the fragments that I am following the path that*
> *someone else has already trodden; the author of the letters has preceded me*
> *in my traversal of this island. I walk on, exploring this silent twilight, the*
> *fragments of letters becoming more confused, the mental state of the writer*
> *deteriorating as I move, until I have a vision of climbing an aerial tower,*
> *and plunging to the ground. I fly over the island, over all the locations I*
> *have visited, until once again I am at the stone jetty, and the screen fades to*
> *black, with the words 'come back' ringing in my ears. Then I am back—*
> *back at the stone jetty; the sun is setting and I am alone on this island.[i]*

As this brief (but concise) walkthrough shows, *Dear Esther[ii]* (all ingame quotes are taken

from this version of the game) is part of a growing category of games known as the first-

person walker, or walking simulator, a genre whose sole activity comprises of traversing a

game space, often at a walking pace. This non-ludic structure allows the player to become

immersed in the world of the game through the uses of her eyes and ears, rather than through

quick reflexes or learned techniques, as is the case with many popular videogames.[iii] This

means that rather than engaging in combat or competition, *Dear Esther* requires the player to

interpret a landscape, in conjunction with the one sided dialogue that an unnamed protagonist

has with the Esther of the games title. The 'story' of the game is told in an epistolary form,

delivered through fragments of letters, and is augmented by the player's ability to observe the

landscape, using both together to build a cohesive narrative of loss, grief, guilt, and suicide.

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Catherine Spooner reminds us that the Gothic has never been solely restricted to books[iv], and 'given that a great majority of video games are based on the need to stay alive'[v] it is not surprising that the 'Gothic obsession with death'[vi] allows it to be a source of much inspiration for this branch of new media. Gothic tropes and elements frequently appear in a variety of videogames, including *Doom*[vii] as Fred Botting[viii] argues, and more recently, the *Portal* franchise[ix], which Ewan Kirkland considers to have a 'distinctly Gothic in theme and tone'[x]. Gothicism can also be seen in the settings, aesthetics, and narratives of many of the videogames released every year, a space into which *Dear Esther* fits.

Whilst videogames ably represent the monstrous—and the need to kill the monster—in videogames, recent years have seen an evolution in terms of videogame content, with developers turning their attention from solely ludic enjoyment to 'serious' games that explicitly foreground a moral aspect, didactic content, or a strong narrative. Games such as *Gone Home*[xi], deal with sexuality and acceptance, whilst *Depression Quest*[xii] tries to offers a way to understand depression, through a narrative that requires the player to make decisions and react to some of the situations that a depressed person might recognise, including suicidal feelings and the reaction to those feelings – something not frequently explored in most videogames.

Gothic themes, tropes, and narrative converge in the 2012 videogame *Dear Esther*. Set in the perpetual twilight of a deserted Hebridean island, this game involves the player exploring a typically Gothic landscape, which is 'more than just a mere backdrop to the main action'[xiii], but is central to the game, and its story. There are two major interpretations of *Dear Esther*, according to Pinchbecks notes, a literal one, where 'the narrator has a nervous breakdown and strands himself on a deserted Hebridean island'[xiv], or a version of the island that 'is not a real space at all…a visualisation of the destroyed interior landscape of the narrator's mind' (*ibid*). Both of these interpretations can be supported by the ambiguous

letter fragments; however, this chapter is concerned with the second interpretation. In this reading, I contend that through a subversion of gaming expectations and tropes, *Dear Esther's* simple control system, and the lack of interactivity with the games landscape, the player takes on the role of a ghost that haunts the island, occupying a liminal space between the player and the narrator in the game, and forcing the narrator to endlessly repeat his suicide and the events that lead to it.

Dear Esther was originally released in June 2008 for the popular game *Half Life 2*. Using many of the structural elements of its 'parent' game, such as the graphics, and sounds, users are able to adapt them to create new elements, or even a wholly original game that bears little resemblance to its parent, even as it needs the original game to be accessed. Following its initial release, *Dear Esther* was entirely remade and rereleased in February 2012 as a standalone title, with extra content and an amplified and richer landscape, and again in late 2016, taking advantage of technological advances that allow even more photorealistic visuals and sound, and further enhancing the narrative experience of the game, creating a more 'real' space for the narrator to haunt. The result the non-ludic strategy means that the player to concentrate solely on the narrative, the setting, and the soundscape, commonly the forgotten or unnoticed elements of a videogame, yet their importance in the representation of videogame narratives is as important as their comparative elements in other media such as film. The landscape is complemented by a Gothic score, resulting in feelings of solitude, and of an increasing sense of uneasiness as the game progresses and the disparate elements of the narrative begins to knit together. Through its narrative and through ludic disempowerment, *Dear Esther* offers the player a ghost story, and provides an insight into the mind of the suicidal protagonist, through a tale of death, imprisonment, madness, and escape that is recognisable throughout the history of Gothic fiction, placing the player within the narrative itself, physically driving it onward, both through her actions and the replay necessary to come

to a full understanding of that narrative, and asking her to interpret the information she discovers in order to discover the game's suicidal and Gothic heart.

The control system for *Dear Esther* is simple: all that is required is basic movement: no running, jumping, ducking, or shooting is required to play, something unfamiliar to most players. Yet, this momentum allows the player to uncover three distinct stories: that of a Scandinavian hermit named Jacobson, an Eighteenth Century explorer named Donnelly, and (most importantly for this paper) the narrators own story. The game reaches a climax with the suicide of the unnamed (male) narrator, where he hopes to be reunited with Esther. Instead, as the walkthrough at the beginning of this chapter shows, he (and the player) is transported back to the stone jetty to begin again. Reaching specific areas in the landscape triggers the recitation of these fragments of the letters, (generally one of three or four available, and that contain slightly different information). Gothic narratives such as *Dracula*[xv], *Frankenstein*[xvi], and more recently *We Need to Talk About Kevin*[xvii] and *World War Z*[xviii] all make use of this structure, with the potential for unreliable narration being an key factor in these texts. It is into this tradition that *Dear Esther* fits: the unreliability of the narrator becomes a major factor in the interpretive nature of the narrative. The fragmentary nature of the letter delivery means that the player, in order to understand the narrative fully, must repeatedly force the narrator to relive his suicide, haunting this landscape with his continued presence each time the game is switched on and the journey begun anew. The narrator himself appears to have an awareness of his status as haunter, telling Esther 'I have lost track of how long I have been here, and how many visits I have made overall' as the game opens, something Pinchbeck also signals, when he writes that 'the idea of a cycle is important here, that the player is given the sense this is all a repeat'[xix]. Usually, video games use death and reincarnation as a way to learn from past mistakes, and thereby to progress, the cycle being broken as the player becomes skilled enough to continue. *Dear Esther* refutes this

classic gaming trope; instead the game forces the narrator to relive the same events over and over again, and enshrouds him in his own version of hell.

The physical setting of *Dear Esther* is a beautiful, deserted, Hebridean island, but even this is called into question by the ambiguous and interpretative nature of the game. Playing the game, the landscape foregrounded and interactivity limited, the player begins to question its verisimilitude finding herself 'slipping into the delusional state of ascribing purpose, deliberate motive to everything' in a landscape that is wholly created, whether that is by a game designer, or by the narrators own mind. One of the opening narrative fragments has the narrator reveal 'I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island', while another fragment asks 'was this island formed during the moment of impact, when we were torn loose from our moorings and the seatbelts cut motorway lanes into our chests and shoulders. Did it first break surface then?' The island is created as a result of his own suicide, with his guilt functioning much as the infection in his body, preventing healing and causing him endless pain. This island then, is kept alive by the narrators own haunting of this space. This is made even more explicit when he relates having kidney stones removed in hospital, remarking 'now my stones have grown into an island and made their escape and you have been rendered opaque by the car of a drunk'. He, himself understands the islands structure, yet is unable to escape its confines.

The landscape of *Dear Esther* is a clearly Gothic space: the barren, yet beautiful landscape is as sublime as that found in *Frankenstein* or *Wuthering Heights*, and inspires awe as the player walks around the island, and equally has the capacity to chill the player with its bleak emptiness. This landscape, is 'comparable to eighteenth-century aesthetic notions, in which a sense of the sublime occurs in an encounter with an immensity the mind cannot comprehend, a natural and divine power found in the sovereign shape of rugged, mountainous landscapes'.[xx] The player passes, but is unable to interact with the evidence of

previous human habitation, ranging from a stone circle thousands of years old, to an aerial that sends a red beacon into the perpetual twilight of the game, with old buildings being part of this landscape, their ruinous presence a reminder of the Gothic spaces of many other narratives. This creates a feeling of gloom and deterioration that pervades the entire landscape, which encompasses the extreme contrasts thought of as being crucial by Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, when she writes 'the Gothic landscape plunges from extreme to extreme; from the height of an airy bell to the depth of a dungeon vault[xxi]. Removal of all the ludic elements of the game forces the player to pay attention to these details, found in many videogames, but which remain unnoticed as she engages in battles, competition, and point scoring.

Whilst the player walks, and the information the narrator delivers becomes increasingly disjointed (due to blood poisoning), it becomes clear that the player is following the narrators path as he contemplates and commits suicide, before being returned to the stone jetty, to begin his journey again. The letters contain details that appear out of joint with the landscape: near the end of his journey, the narrator relates finding a cargo of paint that he will mix with 'ashes and tarmac and the glow from our infections' long after these have been seen by the player, for example. The letters also allow the player to gain an understanding into the reasons for his suicide: as the narrator becomes increasingly confused, these become more frequent, and refer to himself, rather than another character, Paul as being responsible for Esther's death. In these fragments, the narrator suggests that he has an alcohol problem and intimates that he was drunk-driving when the accident that claimed Esther occurred. He admits to being drunk as he arrived at the island and has painted the chemical symbol for alcohol (CH_3CH_2OH) over the island in his delirious state in paint he has found. The landscape itself aids in providing the information that the player needs to understand the narrative, alongside the spoken words.

The relationship the narrative has with the landscape can be summarised best by one of the fragments the narrator relates as he crosses the third beach of the island 'To explore here is to become passive, to internalise the journey and not to attempt to break the confines…It will take a number of expeditions to traverse this micro continent…to arrive at the point of final departure'. This is joined by one of the opening fragments, where the narrator states 'I return each time leaving fresh markers that I hope, in the full glare of my hopelessness, will have blossomed into fresh insight in the interim'. For the player, this will involve repeating the game, whilst for the narrator, it will mean reliving of the events leading up to his suicide, where he hopes he will be able to end the cycle of haunting, and be reunited with Esther.

The visual construction of the island supports the supposition that landscape is created in the mind of the narrator. As the game progresses, the player sees that the landscape is littered with detritus from the car accident, and surgical equipment that would not be present if the narrator washed ashore, as he says. Interestingly, these objects are randomized, with each play inserting or omitting objects that may be important to the narrative. The final passage of the game, at the point of the narrators suicide is a final letter to Esther, in which he tells her that he has 'painted, carved, hewn, scored into this space all that [he] could draw from him' and that he 'will rise from the ocean like an island without a bottom, come together like a stone, become an aerial, a beacon' and gives further credence to the islands internal construction in the mind of the narrator, and his reappearance at the beginning. This island is a place of memory and of guilt, of repeated attempts to come to terms with the loss of Esther, and failing.

In keeping with many Gothic texts across media, doubling plays an important part in the construction and delivery of this games narrative. There is a very evident doubling of the narrator and the player in *Dear Esther,* as well as with the other characters mentioned in the

letters, primarily Donnelly and Paul. Firstly, and most obviously, the player is continually retracing the footsteps of the narrator and reliving his final days on the island, haunting the island in a very literal sense, and forcing the narrator to relive these events every time the game is turned on. However, the doubling between the narrator and the other characters is more subtle than this. Indeed, the narrative itself (and the notes Pinchbeck produced for his development of the game) suggests that the other characters (with the exception of the hermit) are manifestations of the narrators own psyche, and that this doubling is a further haunting, where the narrator is haunted by himself, and his own previous actions. This concept is first indicated near the beginning of the game, when the player is walking up a cliff path, and a letter fragment discussing a book written by Donnelly relates that 'if the subject matter is obscure, the writers literary style is even more so, it is not the text of a stable or trustworthy reporter. Perhaps it is fitting that my only companion in these last days should be a stolen book written by a dying man'. For the player, this is an ironic statement, especially if it is not the first time she has played the game. The letter fragments show the narrator to be increasingly unstable as the game progresses, and he approaches his death, suggesting that in some way, the narrator is referencing himself. Several times, the narrator speaks of Donnelly in the present tense: he relates that Donnelly speaks to him, and that he physically carries Donnelly's corpse on his back, which 'whispers of guilt…He tells me I was not drunk at all'. This aligns the narrator with Donnelly; the corpse the narrator carries is analogous to the popular phrase describing addiction as a 'monkey on your back', and the oft repeated denial of the alcoholic that they are not drunk.

Central to the narrative of the game—and the suicide of the narrator—is the car accident and its resulting question: was the narrator responsible drunk, and responsible for the death of Esther or is his guilt misplaced? The game does not reveal the answer to this question, but leaves the player to interpret the letter fragments as they become increasingly

more confused. At the beginning of the game, the letter fragments are lucid, relating the events that brought him to the island, the theft of Donnelly's book from Edinburgh library, so as to guide him around the island and visiting Paul, attempting unsuccessfully to come to terms with his loss. This coherent structure changes as the narrator's health breaks down, and he approaches his death, producing a narrative technique in which the player becomes confused, mirroring that of the narrator. As his state of mind deteriorates, he begins to become muddled about facts, and starts to contradict previous statements, and this results in the player not being able to decide who is responsible for what actions in the narrative, just as the narrator himself seems to be unable to distinguish between different people and their actions. For example, the narrator, early in the game, suggests that Paul was the driver of another car, and is responsible for Esther's death, saying 'He still maintains he wasn't drunk, but tired' at one point. When delirious however, the narrators ravings suggest that it was not Paul's fault, but his own actions that caused Esther's death: the guilt that Donnelly whispers of, which tells the narrator he was not drunk, along with 'I saw only bruises, cut into the cliffs by my lack of sobriety' offer an implicit an admission of his own guilt. He also admits to 'being increasingly unable to find that point where the hermit ends and Paul and I begin'.

As well as being a character, Paul also alludes to what is an explicitly religious theme in the game. Within the letter fragments, and written on the landscape itself, there are repeated references to Damascus, which links to Paul and is a clearly religious allusion (as is Esther). According to Christian religion, Paul, whilst travelling to Damascus underwent a dramatic conversion to Christianity, becoming a key figure in creating the 'doctrine that would turn Christianity from a small sect of Judaism into a worldwide faith' (BBC 2011). At various points in the game, Paul (the game character) is compared to the Biblical apostle; the journey of the player and the narrator is compared to that of Paul and his journey to Damascus, and the literal road to Damascus is compared to the stretch of the M5 where

Esther was killed. The religious theme is seen in more than these references, however: the musical score, the content of the letters to Esther, such as describing the island is considered in religious terms: 'Donnelly tells me that [the shepherds] had one Bible that was passed around in strict rotation. It was stolen by a visiting monk…did they assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses, marking the geography with a superimposed significance; that they could actually walk the Bible and inhabit its contradictions?' There are several other references to religion in the letters, the first being at the opening of the game, when the narrator mentions an 'alpha point'. Pinchbeck explains that this is a reference to 'the religious idea of God being the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of all things'. There is also a reference to the Sermon on the Mount, to Lot and his wife, and to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the letter fragments[xxii], all of which point to a religious undertone to the game. All of these clues in the text alluding to Christian religion support the concept of the island being a personal purgatory for the narrator, constructed of his own guilt and sin. Many religions, until very recently, believed that suicide was a major sin, and 'the Roman Catholic Church forbade the Christian burial of those who committed suicide' and 'the same norms were held by other Christian churches, or other religions and ethnic denominations'[xxiii]. Therefore, the act of suicide that ends (and begins) the game denies the narrator forgiveness, and dooms him to repeat his actions.

It is impossible to discuss the cyclical and repetitious nature of *Dear Esther* without making reference to Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[xxiv] Freud writes that there is a 'compulsion to repeat'[xxv] things, even to the point where this repetition is harmful, and counterproductive, as the 'compulsion to repeat also recalls from past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure'[xxvi] to the person who is engaged in the repetition. Freud explains that the activity being repeated is 'intended to lead to satisfaction; but no lesson has been learned from the old experience of these activities having led instead only to unpleasure.

In spite of that, they are repeated, under pressure of a compulsion'[xxvii]. This informs the underlying structure of the game. The narrator, having committed suicide, is then driven by a compulsion to repeat his actions again and again; each time the intention is to achieve the satisfaction of being reunited with Esther – but instead of the reward he seeks, he is once again returned to the opening of the game, where the repetition will begin again. I consider that narrators guilt brings about this repetition, functioning in the same way as Freud's 'punishment dreams', which 'merely replace the forbidden wish-fulfilment by the appropriate punishment for it'[xxviii], and that the island itself is a dreamlike space which the narrator has himself constructed from his suicide on the real island.

The ideal method of playing *Dear Esther,* as with many other videogames, is in a darkened room, with the sound playing through earphones to block out any external noise, thus allowing the player to focus solely on the game. This allows the sounds of the landscape and the musical score to become foregrounded, alongside the narrative and to take their place as an integral part of the narrative experience. Music has a sonic space of its own making, as Jean-Luc Nancy, amongst others argues, and so means that music engenders a time and space of its own[xxix], which alongside the perpetual twilight of the island means that the player is invited to leave behind the here and now of reality and to allow herself to feel the immersive effect of the soundtrack to *Dear Esther*; the ambient sounds, the disembodied human noises, and the musical score combine with the landscape to raise the player's awareness of sight and sound—to feel part of the diegesis. Isabella van Elferen, in *Gothic Music*, considers gothic 'game music [to] defy the borders of the screen and envelope game and player alike in its own, sonic version of virtual reality'[xxx] with the inclusion of Gothic sounds, ranging from 'hollow footsteps' to 'ghostly melodies'[xxxi]. *Dear Esther* is filled with the diegetic sounds of the landscape, which combine with the musical score to assist in this enveloping of the player into the game. The crash of the waves on the sea, the sound of the wind across the island and

the plaintive cry of a single seagull as it is disturbed all feature in this soundscape, with the only diegetic man-made sounds being footsteps as the player walks the island, the Gothic music being exchanged for the natural noises of the derelict landscape at places. Serving to highlight the link between the music and the sounds of the landscape, the source of the footsteps the player hears as she walks the island are enigmatic; are they the footsteps of the player, or are they the footsteps the narrator, reminding the player of his prior claim on the narrative, and the setting, as well as his journey to death: a supernatural echo that only the player can hear, but the source is not locatable, there are no feet to create steps evident in the game. Occasionally, the sound of a female voice, whispering 'come back' reminiscent of Catherine Earnshaw's 'Let me in'[xxxii] can be heard if, for example, the player sinks into the sea, refusing to let her fade into nothingness, calling her back to the beach and the endless repetition of the journey over and through the island, and that final plunge from the beacon.

Throughout the game, music seems to play randomly as the player walks; a solo violin or the unaccompanied voice of a piano penetrate the diegetic sounds, dragging the player as van Elferen says, 'along in the musical movement from the mundane to the divine or the occult'[xxxiii] and enveloping her in the timeless nature of the narrative, a time parallel to, within and yet without the present outside the game. Since music is a temporal art form it cannot possibly exist in an atemporal vacuum, and therefore its presence detracts from the timelessness the visual representation of the landscape suggests and so provides a dissonance in the listener, and her interpretation of the game. Usually, a listener would expect the mundane—a complete and unified melody; however, in Gothic music, the divine and/or occult can be represented in the fragmented and broken snatches of melody that are heard throughout *Dear Esther*. Musical theory uses expectation and deviation as part of its basis, and so the refusal of gothic music to lead to a mundane outcome suggests that the composer is deliberately subverting the musical score to create an unsettling piece. A female voice can

be discerned within the music, her voice a non-diegetic element of the game, seemingly indistinguishable from the diegetic noise of the landscape and her litany a religious undertone to remind the player of the islands position as limbo, the place between life and death that the narrator inhabits. This example also functions as an instance of stylistic awareness; that is, the player will consider this as religious through expectations, even as the narrative subverts it. The musical score assists the interpretation of the narrative as being endless, the repetition of the events and the lack of Perfect Cadences (the traditional way to 'end' a piece of music or to 'resolve' dissonance) means the music refuses to have a final ending, allowing the return to the games beginning to be deliberate and part of the fragmented narrative that the score suggests[xxxiv].

At the point where the narrator begins the climb up the radio mast, and commits suicide, control is completely removed, placing the player in a passive position: even the prospect of movement is denied her. Again, the links with religion are made manifest, the predetermined nature of the journey made explicit at this last moment – there is no choice in this act, and the narrator will once again take his own life. For the narrative, this is the culmination of the narrators journey, he believes he is about to be reunited with his beloved Esther. The player soars across the island, the music reminiscent of a religious litany, the religious echoes becoming louder and more dominant in the piece as the player approaches the place where the game began. There is a discordant note, and the screen starts to get darker, fading slowly to black. There is a final 'come back' and the game begins anew, the narrator begins his journey once again. He is denied redemption, and must repeat his journey endlessly, every time the player loads the game.

At first glance, *Dear Esther* seems to be a simple game; the lack of interaction counterintuitive to many gamer's expectations. However, this game is a sophisticated and deeply thought out piece of software, with the focus on the narrative as gameplay,

specifically in the interpretation of the narrative through the events, landscape and soundscape of the game. Each element of the game is a constituent portion of the narrative, and the player combines these to create a narrative based on their own elucidations of the letter fragments, the landscape, and the musical score, one that allows the player to act as a quasi-author of the piece, bringing their own understanding and experience to a deliberately ambiguous work that allows multiple interpretations. The suicide of the narrator forms the basis of the games cyclical structure, and explains the need to replay the game several times in order to understand the narrative. The suicide also informs the narrator's mental state, and explains the island as a manifestation of his own tortured psyche – literally a religious purgatory from which he can never be freed, brought about because of his sins: the death of Esther, his responsibility for her death, and his sucide.

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[i] This walkthrough is based on my own primary playing experience.

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