

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Tlemcen



Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English

Narrative Videogames: The Literary Genre of the Digital Age

*A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as a Partial Fulfilment of
the Master Degree in Anglo Saxon Literature and Civilization*

Presented by

Ms. MEDJAHED Soumia Ikram

Mr. MESSAOUDI Marwan

Supervised by

Dr. MOURO Wassila

Academic Year 2017-2018

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*D*edications

To my mother; my sunlight no matter how dark it gets.

Soumia



To my loved ones.

Marwan

Acknowledgments

Our profound gratitude goes first and foremost to our supervisor Dr. Mouro Wassila, for setting an example of devotion, engagement and kindness. We can safely say that without her faith in us, her precious guidance and constant support and encouragement, this work would not have been completed.

Our earnest thanks go to the board of examiners, Dr. Frid Daoudi and Mr. Rahmoun Omar, for devoting their time and patience to examine this work. But beyond that, we are indebted to you for always keeping an open mind and instilling in us a scientific curiosity and critical thinking, we are lucky to have been your students. Thank you ever so much.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Ms. Mengouchi Meriem for always opening her door to us whenever we ran into any confusion. Thank you for your contagious passion.

We would also like to thank Dr. Berbar Souad for her professionalism and invaluable aid in this research and beyond it. We feel lucky to have had you as a teacher.

Special thanks to our teacher Dr. Semmoud Abdellatif for pushing us up this path. Thank you sir for always believing in us and opening our eyes and hearts to this field.

Last but not least, we would like to extend our gratitude to anyone who has lent us a helping hand during our academic journey.

Abstract

This dissertation deals with the stigma-ridden medium that is the videogame and how it relates to the highly-regarded art of literature. While there is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of videogames as major cultural artefacts of our time, they continue to be studied essentially for their behavioral effects or in terms of their ludic aspects and little else. Recently, there has been renewed interest in videogames in the academia prompted by the rapid evolution of the medium especially in its story telling function, increasingly at the core of its design purposes. However, proper examination of its narrative and literary aspects is still lacking relevant substance. Thus, this interdisciplinary research compares the narrative elements of videogames to those of another established art, literature, with the narrative fiction prototype, the novel genre in particular. The central thesis being that the story-driven or narrative videogame can be considered as part of literature for its potential as an interactive, audiovisual as well as literary storytelling medium that effectively tells book-worthy stories. The work is divided into two chapters, the first covers the major theoretical dimensions necessary for the analysis that will be carried on in the second chapter which is as a practical application of literary and narrative theory on videogame narratives, precisely that of the arguably postmodern story of *Dear Esther* to reach the conclusion that videogames and literature, though seemingly unrelated, are closely linked in both narrative and literariness.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

BAFTA: British Academy Film and Television Awards

ESA: Entertainment Software Association

FPS: First Person Shooter

GANG: Game Audio Network Guild

MMOG: Massively Multiplayer Online Game

RPG: Role Playing Game

TIGA: The Independent Game Developers' Association

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

From the dawn of humanity, men have always used whatever means were available to relay and pass on their experiences which allowed them to break barriers and connect with one another. For the longest time, literature was the most highly regarded medium of expression and storytelling and the book has dominated the scene as the go-to for mental stimulation from entertainment to education. Despite its many genres, literature has become almost exclusively equated with the Novel form, unsurprisingly, as the novel has proven itself to be the most enduring genre, popular among all layers of society. Its general appeal is due to its particular emphasis on the simple individual; his everyday life, his struggles and joys, as well as its interest in humanity's most delicate subjects and the power it has in exposing society's ills. But human beings are evolutionary by nature, with every technological innovation since the pen and paper and the printing press, stories took different forms from book to film to videogame.

Videogames can no longer be denied the status they have acquired in the modern times with their rapid evolution from being a movable dot in a black screen to hyper-realistic complex story-driven experiences. Despite being a hugely engrossing industry shaping the world's economy, and the society; influencing youth and elders alike, in the academia, the study of videogames is still in its infancy, considered an inferior field of research stigmatised for being solely a world of first person shooter games inducing violence and passivity, disregarding the advancement it has been witnessing and the potential it has as a medium of storytelling with literary merits. However, with the medium maturing in recent years, it is starting to draw more and more attention towards itself, but not just in terms of behavioural effects and what the medium can do as it was majorly regarded in the early years of interest, but of what it is becoming as a cultural artefact.

The Videogame used to stress on itself being a *game* with minimal narrative to keep the player engaged, but recently the balance has shifted in favour of stories, making videogames simply an interactive narrative medium in a lot of the recently published titles. While on the one hand, ludologists still try to assert the view of videogames as exclusively mechanics, non-representational simulations, rejecting the

focality of narrative, and dismissing the study of the more experimental narrative games that they consider as “colonised” by other arts. On the other hand, videogames are increasingly gaining interest in various fields of the academia making it the subject of a new dynamic and promising interdisciplinary area. Indeed, the Videogame industry is moving further away from the monopoly of Triple-A publishers, with indie developers marketing high quality games in terms of storytelling content and playability, appealing to a different kind of audience blurring the lines between game and story and begging for a reconsideration of what the medium can do and offer to the academic world.

In the existing literature, while some attempts have been made to investigate videogames as narrative fiction and eventually a form of literature, it is debatable whether they have succeeded to examine the increasing potential for storytelling of the medium and adapt to its rapidly evolving techniques. Previous research has put forward arguments for the artefact’s abilities and suggested a new “reading” of videogames in the manner of other media like film, television and literature but often, the games used as illustrations tend not to be story-based or even text-based which usually leads to weak conclusions that cannot be generalised over the medium. Furthermore, when playing story-heavy titles released in the past decade, one is hit by a striking similarity to literature with a particular “novelistic” feel to them. This has triggered the following research question:

- Can narrative videogames be considered as a literary genre?

To answer this question, the following sub questions will be addressed:

- How can videogames be compared to the novel?
- How do videogames communicate stories being an interactive and audio-visual medium?

The starting hypothesis for the main research question suggests that videogames may be a different and perhaps postmodern genre of literature, but literature nonetheless.

For the sub questions, the starting assumption is that videogame narratives seem to have many similarities to the novel, especially the postmodern one. Furthermore, the features of interactivity specific to the medium, as well as its audio-visual nature all could contribute in telling the story and make for an immersive experience that heightens the story's reception and meaning-making among the player-reader.

By answering the above questions, this interdisciplinary research will attempt to reposition videogames as an art form drawing from previous forms and disciplines. It draws between centuries' old tradition of narrative encompassed in Literature and a newly emerging medium of storytelling that is yet to be fully developed, completely understood and comprehensively studied. It argues that while videogames have not yet reached their full potential, they are definitely taking a direction towards a more mature narrative that is worth investigating manifested in their highly artistic merits and literary properties. And because there is yet to be an established methodology for examining videogames, an interdisciplinary approach is used with the novel in particular as a comparative ground to identify the literary and narrative aspects while considering the videogame as "text" allowing for a reading under established textual approaches. The choice falls upon the novel considering its status, as the uncontested prototype of narrative fiction for the last centuries.

The originality of the thesis lies mainly in its outward comparison between the two seemingly different mediums and the assumption that one can be a vehicle of the other, videogames as part of literature, and in the selected videogames used as illustrations, being story-driven games which will be analysed in terms of narrative. Mainly, the narrative exploration game *Dear Esther* will be used to highlight the features of narrative and the postmodern techniques employed in telling an emotionally charged and highly experimental story.

In order to reach conclusions concerning the research, the thesis will be divided into a theoretical and a practical part, the former is a literature review that tackles previous research on the subject with varying details depending on the relevance to the current research work, in addition to the main concept definitions

necessary for the building of the arguments in the following parts of the work. The latter part will constitute an analysis of the videogame Dear Esther, after the identification of the videogame's postmodern narrative aspects by comparing them to the novel's then its literariness by examining the language use, lastly, features specific to videogames such as interactivity, music and graphics will be examined to conclude how they contribute in effectively telling the story, compared to the novel form. By the end, all elements of the research will be brought to an overall analysis to determine whether narrative videogames have the necessary elements to be considered as literature.

Chapter One: Literature and the Digital Age

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1.1. Introduction

In an attempt to bridge the gap between what is considered as literature, mainly the novel, and a medium seemingly different; videogames, in terms of narrative and literariness, this chapter will serve as a ground for laying some concept definitions as well as the relevant existing literature necessary to build the research on. The chapter will begin by defining the art the extended essay is concerned with, Literature, and its most prominent form, the novel as it is considered the medium's epitomic genre of narrative fiction or 'storytelling', challenged only by film in recent times, whereas videogames remain largely unexplored or properly examined for their literary merits by scholars who mainly focus on either their social and cognitive effects or game mechanics.

1.2. Literature

The notion of Literature has been around for so long that it seems to need no definition; and yet on a brief thought, it seems not to be an easy task to pin it down, due to its complexity, relativity and continuously shifting aspect. However, it is critical to this research to explore and attempt to find a suitable denotation to determine whether videogames can or cannot be considered part of it.

Many scholars have sought to establish a final and definite definition of Literature, but ink is still spilled in an attempt to answer the questions: What is Literature? And what is not Literature?

Renowned literary critic Jonathan Culler (2000) in his book *Literary Theory* dedicates a large division to defining literature, he assumes that literature is what a certain culture deems as Literature, but that, to him, only leads to the questions: "What makes us treat something as literature?" (p. 22) implying a Criterial approach to define Literature, as is used in English dictionaries, where a set of criteria need to be met in order for works to be called Literature (Meyer, 1997).

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To set a line between what can be considered literary or non-literary, Culler (2000) suggests that literature is “language decontextualized, cut off from other functions and purposes” (p. 25), in that case, the text is itself a context that calls for a special kind of attention as what we believe literature tends to do. This is what gives it its interpretable and examinable qualities.

Collins English Dictionary’s entry for Literature states, “written material such as poetry, novels, essays, etc, especially works of imagination characterized by excellence of style and expression and by themes of general or enduring interest.” (1994)

However, this definition does not exclude factual works like history or scientific books or even a recipe, at the same time; it allows the inclusion of any medium that bears an enduring value in terms of style and themes. In this respect, scholars René Wellek & Austen Warren (1984) take issue with the contention suggesting that the term Literature is kept only to denote the art of literature, that is, “imaginative literature”, pointing a problem with the term itself which etymologically comes from *litera* indicating only written or printed literature, thus excluding ‘oral literature’ (p. 11).

Along the same argument, essayist and critic Arthur Krystal (2016), argues that literature is no longer what it used to be fifty years ago. It has been redefined since 2009 by Marcus and Sollors with the publication of *A New Literary History of America* in which, to them, “literary” denotes “not only what is written but what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form” (p. 1).

Omar Rahmoun (2013), echoing Culler’s definition, summarises the significance of literature to people saying: “literature is considered as those writings that carry people’s voice, expressing their emotional as well as their intellectual pleasure. In addition to its artistic aspect, literature holds a social role shown in the different walks of life” (p. 9).

Furthermore, Literature is “the use of well-chosen words to tell a story through narrative, involving characters in conflict, or to express an emotion or idea through artfully arranged images” (Encyclopedia Encarta, 2009).

There is apparently no shortage of definitions of Literature varying depending on which angle it is tackled from, but what can be deduced is that in broad literature can be non-fictional in the form of magazines, newspapers, essays, technical books, etc. But Literature as an art, in its most common definition, is the fictional, or the imaginative creation, that is traditionally comprised of mainly epics, poetry, drama, short stories and the most significant genre, the novel, all of which are characterised by their narrative aspect as well as their fictionality. But not all stories are part of the art of literature, as an example; a newspaper article that reports a murder story does not do so like a mystery crime novel, which leads to investigating what specifically differentiates the two.

1.2.1. Literariness

Literariness is the quality of being literary. It has become evident by now that not all works can be considered literature insinuating that there are some aspects which make us regard something as literature and dismissing another as not part of literature. Although the line is not as sharply cut as one may think, scholars have pointed at some characteristics and patterns in what is commonly referred to as literature which can be termed as Literariness, despite the labelling being used differently among literary theorists.

The term literariness was coined by Formalist Critic Roman Jakobson in 1919 to denote “The sum of special linguistic and formal properties that distinguish literary texts from non-literary texts” (Baldick, 2008). In his own words: “the object of literary science is not literature but *literariness*, that is, what makes a given work a literary work”. Formalists regard literariness to be a set of formal qualities in the texts that can be observable in the language, or what is known as defamiliarisation; unusual changes made to usual and ordinary language forms that challenge the expectation of the reader.

While this view of literariness persisted for a while, Russian Formalism was opposed later on with the appearance of more recent theories, namely Reader Response that puts emphasis on the other far end of the spectrum which is the reader and how he receives the texts and reacts to it establishing a connection to the author and his intent; “Literary writing is, in essence, a 'response', a subjective personal view which the writer expresses through his themes, ideas, thoughts, reminiscences, using his armoury of words to try to evoke, or provoke, a response in his reader” (Oldcastle, 2000 para. 9). Unlike Formalists, some scholars rejected the purely linguistic approach to treating literature which is based on objectivity, instead celebrating the subjectivity of literature and the way it is studied by acknowledging the role of the reader in meaning making.

Culler (2000) concludes that “the ‘literariness’ of literature may lie in the tension of the interaction between the linguistic material and readers’ conventional expectations of what literature is” making the link between the linguistic properties and the reader’s response to the defamiliarisation of language resulting in an emotive artistic experience. Oldcastle (2000) defines literary texts as a result of “a self-conscious, imaginative mode of writing which uses words not just to convey information, but as an art form. Ultimately it is a response to life” (para. 31).

Literary writing is whatever is intended to be considered as such by the writer and experienced as such by the reader. It is most often language that conveys fictional narratives that appeal to and capture the reader’s interest.

1.2.2. Narrative Fiction

It is no secret that stories are a universal human feature that is fundamental to human beings’ lives. Stories are how we make sense of the world around us and share our own world. Narrative is everywhere; it manifests itself in different forms from novels, films, videogames, myths, folk tales, anecdotes, songs, comics, paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies, to dreams, daydreams and role-play. The term narrative is used in several fields including literature and new media.

Narrative Fiction or fictional narrative can be simplified as “the narration of a succession of fictional events” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005).

Narrative itself is a sequence of connected events, whether real or fictional. Non fictional narrative includes journalism, memoir, and biography to cite a few; whereas Fictional narrative can be prose, drama, some forms of poetry, songs and videogames (Literary Devices Editors, 2018).

Academic Michael McKeon defines narrative fiction by exclusion and remarks the tendency to confuse any narrative fiction with the novel. “Fiction” he writes, rules out factuality; “narrative” rules out discourse that isn’t told, or whose telling doesn’t take the form of a story. In other words, both “fiction” and “narrative” are evidently a good deal broader than “the novel,” which isn’t the only path either to fiction or to narration (McKeon, 2000, p. xiii).

Although narrative fiction is a broad term found in many genres and takes different forms depending on the medium, remains that amongst scholars and even laymen, the novel has become for a long time now, synonymous to Narrative Fiction.

According to McKeon (2000) narrative as a theory has gained more interest lately than that of the novel as a genre. He quotes literary critic Northrop Frye explaining that “the dominance of the novel in modern times has resulted in a “novel-centered view of prose fiction” by which diverse narrative forms are reduced to the single, culturally normative model of the novel” (p. 2). As a consequence, the novel has become a basis of comparison to other narrative genres of emerging mediums such as comics, film and videogames.

1.3. The Novel

The novel, as its name indicates is a rather new genre of literature that appeared in the 18th century conditioned by the new social, political and personal realities of the modern era. It was characterised by its realism and individualism, making the genre universal and original (Watts, 1957).

Chevalley defines the novel as “a fiction in prose of a certain extent” (Cited in Forster, 1990, p. 25). It is distinguished by its fictonality and prose form, compared to History and Poetry. Its originality lays in the fact that it not only represents life but portrays aspects of the ordinary human experience and imitates reality compared to the romance or the previous literary genres. Indeed, according to Scott (1836) it is “a fictitious narrative ... [in which] the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events and the modern state of society” (p. 129).

Being a major artefact, the novel has been the subject of extensive study by scholars in literary studies as well as other interdisciplinary fields. But what makes a novel?

1.3.1. Aspects of the Novel

Many scholars attempted to study prose fiction and determine the distinguishing elements that make the novel form.

Among whom was academic and novelist E.M. Forster (1990) who identifies some vital elements that constitute a novel in his widely referenced series of lectures published under *Aspects of the Novel* in 1927 remaining relevant today as a classic in traditional criticism. Forster sees that a novel’s success is measured after all by its reception, however, criticizing sentimentality as subjective and elusive, he emphasises the importance to set a framework outlining the main components essential to the novel.

Successfully deconstructing the art of story writing in the novel genre, the first element in his book is, naturally, the story.

1.3.1.1. The Story

The first thing that comes to mind when thinking of any novel is certainly the happenings that take place in it. In addition to other key ingredients, the novel does not hold without a story, in fact, it is what makes its appeal to the modern readers.

Calling it the backbone of the novel, Forster (1990) indeed recognises that story-telling is the aspect around which the novel is built, as its main function is unarguably to tell a story (p. 40). He traces the story back to Palaeolithic times where story-telling was an oral practice to the primitive man. It is human curiosity that fuels the reader's desire to know more, which is exploited by the writer who keeps him always eagerly seeking what happens next in a series of suspenseful events (Forster, 1990, p. 41).

A story is, thus, defined as “a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence.” (Forster, 1990, p. 42). Simply put, it is to tell what happens in a certain order governed by time.

These events, however, evidently need actors, who either do the action or are to whom it happens.

1.3.1.2. People

The major distinction of the novel from previous genres is its characterisation. The novel characters are often reflections of real life people and representations of the individual's feelings and values.

What is commonly known as characters is what Forster (1990) calls “People”, he sees them as what adds value to the story.

Forster emphasises the verisimilitude of characters to real people. In the novel, unlike drama where character is known only through action, the author has the power to bring his people to life by exposing their inner lives, deepest thoughts, desires and fears, achieving a sense of intimacy between the character and the reader who grows familiar with him. More than the curiosity required by the story, characters appeal to the reader's intelligence and imagination.

Novels are usually composed of two types of characters, whenever the author alludes to a sense of completeness that he slowly reveals, he is in the making of three dimensional people which Forster calls Round characters. The second type is a less

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developed kind that usually serves one purpose in the story. (pp. 54 - 80). It is necessary for the novel to have at least one character who most resembles real life people, and to whom the reader can identify. They tend to change throughout the story. Flat characters, however, are two-dimensional and less complex; they do not develop throughout the story.

The story is told through a certain perspective, the point of view of narration. It can vary from an outside onlooker who is either partial or impartial or an omniscient narrator who sees and knows all, or a first person narrator who only gives insight about himself leaving the reader blind to the others' motives and inner lives besides what their external actions show (Forster, 1990, p. 81).

Characters are revealed through *explosion* and *dialogue* (Whitla, 2009, p. 160) either through "telling" or "showing", the author can immediately give voice to his people to introduce themselves which can be an interpretable exchange as put forward by Bakhtin, or he can describe them to the reader in his own voice.

Novel authors tend to use one or multiple perspectives in telling their stories. If they intend to reveal a certain character's secret life, they may do so through a first person point of view or an omniscient narrator. In the case of the former, the reader is in complicity and intimacy with the protagonist.

Finally Forster remarks how characters and plot are closely linked to each other and a good author is he who can successfully balance between the two (1990).

Plot is the third aspect of the novel outlined by Forster and is usually confused with story.

1.3.1.3. The Plot

The plot, or the Storyline, is what Aristotle considered the single most important element of the Tragedy, at the time, which must have a beginning, middle and end. It is made up of events linked by cause and effect meant to arouse emotions in its audience, or in the case of the novel, the reader.

Plot is differentiated from story by Forster who argues that Plot is a narrative of events linked by causality rather than time. The authors can play with the linearity of events and delay revealing causes or consequences to keep the reader's attention and creative suspense. It appeals to the reader's intelligence to figure out the whys of the story and his memory to keep up with the events and try to link them to be able to construct the story and make sense of it in its wholeness (Forster, 1990).

Simply put, the plot is narrative points arranged by causality. It emerged in the Tragedy and is now found in all narrative forms; from drama, to the novel to film.

1.3.1.4. Setting

While Forster does not speak of Setting using this term, he alludes to the importance of time and space in the creation of the novel, he puts particular emphasis on time without diving too deep in it because he views it as “a dangerous thing”, too philosophical but without which the novel cannot exist or make sense.

Like Forster, David Lodge is another scholar who deconstructed fiction writing, but unlike the former, Lodge (1992) takes a different approach to doing that, as his division of fiction into aspects is “artificial” since he sees these effects as “plural and interconnected” (p. 56). Setting, for example is part of plot.

Reinforcing the notion of plurality, Writer's Digest author Rozelle (2005) points out that “In some cases, the setting becomes a character itself. And all of the attendant details — societal conventions, seashores, mountains, regional dialects — determine the overall tone” (p. 2). She emphasises the importance of a well described setting in building the story. Along the same lines, Maass (2013) writes “in great fiction, the setting lives from the very first pages. Such places not only feel extremely real, they are dynamic. They change. They affect the characters in the story. They become metaphors, possibly even actors in the drama” (p. 81).

Setting is not just the time and space backdrop of narrative; it can also become a character itself and affects the interplay with other characters. It also relates to Atmosphere and Tone.

1.3.1.5. Fantasy

One of the demands a novel writer makes from his readers is to accept the novel's world which sometimes contains hints at the supernatural that might disrupt the reality of life but comes unsurprising (Forster, 1990, pp. 101-115).

Fantasy is the seamless inclusion of elements unlikely to happen in real life into the fictional world of the novel with the ability to make them feel natural and logical to the reader.

The novel form has greatly matured since its inception in the 18th century, but its constituents have remained roughly the same making it an enduring genre. Critics like Forster and Lodge identify other elements such as Prophecy, Rhythm, and Suspense to name a few. But for the sake of this research, only the major components related to the narrative itself which are of interest to the study are highlighted.

1.4. The Postmodern Novel

Since the inception of the novel, this narrative form has witnessed a lot of changes in terms of constituent characteristics, but keeping its core feature; realistic representation of individuals and human life. The novel has been steadily evolving to incorporate a multitude of features from each period it has survived. Algerian scholar Wassila Mouro (2014) observes that “the development of the novel is related to the society where it has been produced” (p. 2) which is a reflection of the era's happenings that shape the collective consciousness of a certain people in a certain time.

In terms of literary movements, postmodernism is currently the latest recognised stop of the novel in its maturation journey.

1.4.1. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a movement that is most known for being elusive and hard to define in definite terms, the reason being that it is used within a multitude of

disciplines and areas of studies and in its close resemblance to the previous movement, modernism against which it came as an opposition and a continuation at the same time as its name indicates. In literature, postmodernism is agreed to be characterised by a disruption in the traditional techniques of the craft of fiction.

Postmodernism is all about rebellion and the rejection of established institutions, ideologies and forms. Consequently, the novel with its usual aspects was also affected by these ideas. With the rejection of old narrative conventions, new ones emerged in the postmodern era. As famously said by Postmodernist novelist John Hawkes (1965) “...the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme” all of which were affected as a result.

Several techniques are recurrent throughout canonical postmodernist novels, although the postmodern is against the notion of a literary canon and came to destabilise it. Postmodern authors experiment with the basic elements of genre, plot, and narrator to concepts like order, linearity and continuity.

1.4.2. Postmodern Story

While initially the novel’s most essential trait was its ultra-realism in portraying life and making the reader immerse in a story making him forget it was fiction, postmodern novels tell stories differently.

As Jonathan Baumbach (1979) observes “too many times you read a story nowadays and it’s not a story at all, not in the traditional sense.” (Cited in Mambrol, 2017). This qualifies modern and postmodern stories that are often too complicated to make any outward sense.

Forster’s definition of story is questioned in the postmodern since the events that make up the story are often not arranged in a linear time sequence but told through scattered bits and pieces making it hard to grasp as a whole.

1.4.3. Postmodern Characterisation

Whereas characters have been constructed and regarded as embodiments of real-life emotions, values and experiences that resembled real people’s since the

novel's inception, the advances in psychology and science in general changed the way they were portrayed, what they portrayed and how.

The way human psyche was previously perceived as rational and ordered changed and with it the characters' that became just as "chaotic, repressive, irrational, and driven by impulses" (Pinar Dolaykaya, 2017).

The notions of disorder, fragmentation, irrationality reached every aspect in the novel, not excluding the characters being a central element in storytelling.

The people inhabiting the novel were no longer portrayed as rational creatures with clear ordered thoughts, but rather taken a step further towards realism and depicting their deepest thoughts and inner feelings in more accuracy, the result being characterised by a "stream of consciousness" narration with incoherent, incomplete flow of thoughts in segments as it would normally happen in real life, and "interior monologue".

Aleid Fokkema (1991) explains Henry James' contribution to character conception saying "not to be confused with the real thing —a human being — character represents humanity in a 'report of people's experience,'" this shows how modern and postmodern thought puts emphasis on experience rather than "realness" of characters and resemblance to real life people.

1.4.4. Postmodern Plots

Plot is one of the cornerstones of the novel but that did not prevent it from escaping postmodernist experimentation. Postmodernist authors despise wholeness and order and that is reflected in their works through distortions and fragmentation.

Conventionally, "plot is the action of moving forward. It is this movement forward that takes the audience through moments of change, i.e. the plot points." (Galyean, 1995). These points are linked by causality and usually follow a scheme of rising actions, climax and falling actions. However, postmodern texts depart from that tradition. One of the distortions made to plot is the temporal one; the nonlinear narrative technique is a common alteration to plot structure in modern and

postmodern works. The author deliberately jumps forward and backwards in time preventing events from being bound to time linearity thus affecting the understanding of their causality and making the plot seem fragmented and dispersed throughout the novel.

In addition, authors achieve a metafictional plot “by rejecting conventional plot; refusing to attempt to become “real life”; subverting conventions to transform reality into a highly suspect concept; flaunting and exaggerating foundations of their instability; displaying reflexivity” (Orlowski, 1996, para. 12).

Experimentation with plot that makes the reader aware of its fictionality is one of the practices that make a work one of *metafiction*.

1.4.5. Metafiction

As previously defined, Fiction is fabricated events that are not real but which, in the case of the novel essentially; bear a verisimilitude to real life that achieves believability of the tale. Metafiction on the other hand, is “beyond” fiction.

It is a term first coined by William H. Gass. Scholar Patricia Waugh (1984) explains it as a fiction that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (p. 2) Similarly, Linda Hutcheon (1980) explains that “in overtly or covertly baring its fictional and linguistic systems, narcissistic narrative (metafiction) transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretative experience” (p. 154). Making the text challenging and interpretable and transforming the relationship between author, reader and text is seen by scholars as causing the rebirth of the novel in the modern era.

In simpler terms, metafiction is fiction where the text is aware of itself as being an artefact, a mere creation in which the author constantly calls attention to this fact reminding the reader that it is mere fiction, not real.

Several techniques are used within metafiction, such as “creating biographies of imaginary writers; presenting and discussing fictional works of an imaginary character” (Orlowski, 1996, para. 10) or interrupting the narrative to address the reader and make comments about the act of writing. (Cited in Mouro, 2014, p. 180)

Another major technique, considered an illustration for the metafictionality of a text, is to outwardly or inwardly invoke other texts in what is called Intertextuality.

1.4.6. Intertextuality

Nothing is created in vacuum and artistic creations are no exception; this notion of unoriginality is emphasised by postmodern thinkers and reflected by its authors in their allusion to other texts. Intertextuality is a literary discourse technique present in all media from the written to the digital.

First coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966, Intertextuality is a connection and dialogue between texts, authors and literary styles and genres across time and space. Kristeva (1986) views it as ‘a mosaic of references to other texts, genres and discourses.’ (p. 37) It is best explained by Barthes (1977, p. 146) reflecting the spirit of the postmodern age and its understanding of the text, he says “we know now that a text is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” (Cited in Mouro, 2014, p. 25)

Nathalie Piégay-Grosargues that ‘the renewal of works, the abandonment of particular genres, or the birth of new forms’ relate to ‘the interplay of the established relationships between works’ (Cited in Mouro, 2014, p.29). Thus, intertextuality is the process by which texts evolve into new genres under different forms.

Despite making appearance in novels since before the term was coined, this technique, among many, was particularly recurrent in postmodern works where allusions to other texts were purposeful. Intertextuality is now employed more and more across all genres and arts

1.4.7. Magic Realism

Postmodernism is known to experiment with every facet of fiction. While E.M. Forster speaks of Fantasy, postmodern writers take the aspect a step further under what is called Magic Realism.

While it exists in most arts, in literature it is controversial whether it is a genre, style or mode of narrative. Magic Realism can be considered a literary trend that appeared in the 20th century coinciding with postmodernism. The latter stands for the rejection of enlightenment principles of rationalism, and logic in the description of reality. Magic realism is the embodiment of the unusual and irrational that stands side by side with the real. Although the two genres developed in parallel, with Magic Realism starting in the North and South American areas, Postmodernism has been more widely accepted to encompass the former as a subgenre (D'haen, 1995).

The term was used in the 1950s to describe Latin American fiction, and was later popularised to mean all “narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative” (Bowers, 2004). Zamora and Faris (1995) observe that ‘the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism’ (Cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 2).

Magical realist authors introduce various supernatural elements into their realistic fictional world and sometimes “resort to religious iconography, language, and allusion in their texts. The language of religion allows magical realist writers to infuse a sense of wonder and mystery into the narrative” (Duncan, 2015, p. 1).

Magic Realism can converge and diverge with other genres such as Surrealism, Fantasy and Science Fiction. The genre initially started in a variety of arts like painting and while it found ground in literature, especially postcolonial, it has again been imported into other narrative arts such as film and videogames. In fact, professor and game studies scholar Jasper Juul (2015) goes as far as saying that video games are inherently magic realist; “we win or lose the game in the real world, but we slay a dragon (for example) only in the world of the game” outlining how the real and the

fictional exist simultaneously by nature in the medium, in addition to the magical elements in the game world.

1.5. Literature and Technology

Technology has been shaping the way human beings think, create and communicate. Literature and technology are interdependent and have always developed in tandem. Literature evolved in direct response to new media technologies, from the printing press to the internet. These innovations not only affect the way we create literature but also how we write, read, understand and interpret texts. Indeed, many of the current debates echo previous discussions in the histories of technology, new media, and literature (Cordell, 2018).

If we regard every human innovation as technology, the pen and paper or the printer would be the clearest examples of how literature has been shaped by the medium of expression used. Early on, what we now regard as literary heritage was handed down through oral tradition; early written literature was recorded through various primitive means from stone tablets to leaves inscribed by basic tools. The invention of the printing press revolutionised the world in terms of production and accessibility of literature. Technology continues to evolve, and with it the literary medium.

The digital age we live in now is said to have emerged somewhere between the 1950s and 1970s marking the shift from mechanical industry to the digital one with the adoption of the computational technology that took over almost every aspect of human life and the way it is represented which gave birth to new forms of narrative, as Rose (2011) notes: “If stories themselves are universal, the way we tell them changes with the technology at hand. Every new medium has given rise to a new form of narrative” (p. 2).

The fast paced change caused perplexity amongst not only scholars but laymen. Janet Murray (2016) observed in the preface to her revisited edition of the

highly acclaimed *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, that every medium that emerges, from print to film to cyberspace evokes an ambivalence of exhilaration and fear. The new technologies cause dramatic change that challenges our perception of humanity and makes us uneasy by “extending our powers faster than we can assimilate the change” (p. 9).

In the first publication of her book in 1997, Murray speculated writing:

I see glimmers of a medium that is capacious and broadly expressive, a medium capable of capturing both the hairbreadth movements of individual human consciousness and the colossal crosscurrents of global society. Just as the computer promises to reshape knowledge in ways that sometimes complement and sometimes supersede the work of the book and the lecture hall, so too does it 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 (p. 10).

But computer technology was still at its infancy at the time, and there was little belief in, and barely an attempt to explore, the narrative possibilities of the computer medium mainly games due to the dread it initially caused. In fact, Murray illustrates that “starting in the 1970s and 1980s, the same fears provoked by the advent of film and television began to be expressed against videogames, which added interactivity to the sensory allures of sight, sound, and motion” (2016, p. 23). Technology has caused a monumental shift in the way we view, read, react to and interact with literature.

1.5.1. Digital Literature

Murray (2016) asserts “We cling to books as if we believed that coherent human thought is only possible on bound, numbered pages” (p. 9). But fighting the technology current did not last long, the newer generations born into the digital age, adopted and adapted to the new media of expression for literature. Digital Literature

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or E-Literature emerged under many forms. From the hyperlink, or hypertext, fiction brought on by the internet turning the reader into an active participant in the making of the non-linear story, to blog fiction, a serialized participatory literature in the form of diaries in the manner of the Victorian novel, to Interactive Fiction, or playable text and finally, arguably, videogames.

Electronic literature is defined as “born-digital literary art that exploits, as its muse and medium, the transmedia possibilities of the digital” (Starling Gould, 2012). According to the Electronic Literature Organisation: E-Literature is a “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (ELO, 2018).

Murray (2016) believes that “we are living through a historic transition, as important to literary history as it is to the history of information processing”, at the same time, she points out that:

It would be a mistake to compare the first fruits of a new medium too directly with the accustomed yield of older media. We cannot use the English theatre of the Renaissance or the novel of the nineteenth century or even the average Hollywood film or television drama of the 1990s as the standard by which to judge work in a medium that is going through such rapid technical change (p. 34).

Thus emphasising a popular view shared by many scholars in various fields, arguing for the immaturity of the videogame medium, and the unfairness of attempting to compare it with older media. The bigger portions of similarly opinionated scholars, however, do so from the starting viewpoint that videogames are an inferior medium that might never be worthy enough of comparison, especially to literature or film.

Furthermore, Murray writes how “critics have condemned the too-easy stimulation of electronic games as a threat to the more reflective delights of print culture”, illustrating with a popular film critic who had recently complained about his

children preferring the instant gratification of videogames with narrative function over reading literature classics like Dickens' (Murray J. H., 2016). A more popular statement was made by Roger Ebert (2007) that spurred a controversy that goes on till now when claiming that "Videogames can never be art" and would never compare to the works of Shakespeare.

Although his arguments, or lack thereof, were proved flawed by other critics, game developers and designers, as well as gamers, pointing out the fact that his view was merely a reflection of traditional stances unsupported by logic since Ebert had, in fact, never played or experienced the videogames that initiated the debate. This clearly reflects the very issue with the perception of videogames in various scopes that is shadowed by a set of assumptions and widely circulated prejudices.

1.6. Videogames

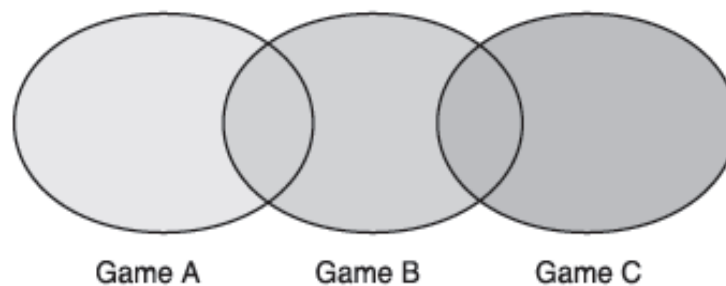
Videogames were for the longest time associated uniquely with first-person shooters and violent combat genres. Often, when one thinks of videogames, the first examples that come to mind are classics, for instance, Tetris, Super Mario, Half-Life, Grand Theft Auto, FIFA and League of Legends. These games, though varied, have been under the spotlight due to their mainstream commercial success, dictating how videogames are viewed by the general public. In fact, videogames have recently resurfaced as a hot topic of debate after the mass-shooting incidents in the USA where American President Trump blamed videogames for inciting violence (Washington Post, 2018). But such aggressive stance towards videogames is neither unprecedented nor unusual. In fact, as Murray (2016) writes it is normal for any new technology to cause disruption in the ecology of cultural values and practices, reflected in negative response and attitudes.

Without yet diving into what videogames do, it seems of paramount importance to define what videogames are, as it will determine the fitting approach to deal with them.

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The Oxford dictionary (2018) definition of videogames is “a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display.” Videogame is composed of two words, *game*, based on which theorists have created their models of definitions and *video*, or computer generated images controlled by players, emphasising the aspect of interactivity. The term Computer Games is sometimes used interchangeably, but videogames are played on various “platforms”, display devices and systems. But such definition is too simplistic that it is excluding.

In this respect, Jennings (2015, p. 5) contends that there can be no pure, universal understanding of what games are. If there is any notion of “what games are,” it is that they are *not* universal or pure of form, echoing German philosopher Ludwig



**Figure 1: Family Resemblance in Games
(Egenfelt-Niels, Smith, & Tosca, 2009)**

Wittgenstein, who in his book, *Philosophical Investigation*, argues that there can be no umbrella definition for all games. He looked at a wide variety of games and came up with the conclusion that all what those games had in common was a “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein, 1967), meaning that games only shared some features but were mostly very different from one another which can be illustrated by the following diagram:

To Wittgenstein, Game A shares features with Game B which shares features with Game C. Game A and Game C share no features hence there can be no common definition for all games. His principle was not specific to games, in fact, it was used later to refer to language games, but is rather regarded as an argument that the concept

of definitions in general is flawed, as is the case for finding a suitable definition for Literature or Videogames.

One of the major theorists of Videogame Studies, Juul, who emphasized the ludic aspect of videogames, defines the game as:

“a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable” (Cited in Egenfelt-Niels et al., 2009, p. 34).

Juul’s definition is formalistic, claiming at the same time that the game is reliant on the player’s attitude. He insinuates that there is a relationship between the player’s efforts and attachment to the negotiable outcome with the very concept of what a game is. He refers to this as the ‘Classic Game Model’. However, some aspects seem to fall outside of this model.

Storytelling according to Juul requires no attachment and hence some recent videogames do not fit into the classic game model. Such games offer vast open worlds and game spaces leading to players not needing a fixed outcome or a goal. Thus, Juul’s definition might be helpful but not sufficient in defining a game.

Between 2001 and 2004, a more accurate model of defining what a game is emerged. Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubeck devised what is known as MDA, which is an abbreviation of Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics, it breaks apart games into three dimensions or layers, the first of which is Mechanics which are the underlying codes of the game. The second layer is Dynamics which plays out based on the game’s mechanics; i.e., everything that happens or can happen within a game. The last layer is the Aesthetic layer which is what the player sees, interacts with and actually experiences, and gets immersed in (Cited in Egenfelt-Nielset. et al., 2009).

Hunicke et al. further divide Aesthetics further into eight elements which create the pleasures of “play”:

1. Sensation (game as sense-pleasure)
2. Fantasy (game as make-believe)
3. Challenge (game as obstacle course)
4. Fellowship (game as social framework)
5. Discovery (game as uncharted territory)
6. Expression (game as self-discovery)
7. Submission (game as pastime)
8. Narrative (game as drama)

Videogames, by nature, feature all eight elements with emphasis falling on some more than others, in addition to Dynamics; which is the game play, and Mechanics, which will be discarded for the sake of this research as an essential, but unconcerned with component.

In 2005, Esposito connected the four main keywords in videogame research: *game*, *play*, *interactivity*, and *narrative*, to give the following definition: “A videogame is a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story*.”

Rouse (2004) asserts that interactivity is at the core of videogames, “The gameplay is the component of the computer games that is found in no other art form: interactivity”. He defines gameplay as “the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes” (Cited in Esposito, 2005, p.3).

Videogames are rapidly changing and each new generation has witnessed alterations in several aspects, from technology-bound game mechanics to aesthetics and narrative content making it challenging to set a final definition or to pin it down for study.

1.6.1. A Brief Historical Timeline of Videogames

It is important for the sake of this research to look at the evolution of videogames, from where they have started, to evaluate the state of videogames now and later draw conclusion on where the industry is headed.

After WWII, two visions of the world were fighting not only in terms of diplomacy, warfare and economy but also technological development, as Donovan (2010) writes “it was in the technological arms race of the Cold War that the video game would be conceived” (p.2).

According to various sources, including Laird (2006), Videogames date back to the mid-twentieth century where the computer technology was used to create basic graphical game, the earliest recorded attempts being *TicTacToe* in 1952 and *Tennis for Two* in 1958. However, the first commercial game was not until the 1960s with the creation of the influential *SpaceWar!*, developed at MIT using vector graphics. In the 1970s, *Periscope*, target shooting game was commercialized by Sega giving birth to the arcade games. The most famous one was *Pong* in 1973 developed by Atari.

Later on racing, and adventure games appeared. Donkey Kong marked the 1980s despite the decline of the market. The major gaming companies also saw the light during those years. The crash did not last long; Space Invaders was released to mark the arcade generation for years ahead. Videogames started being commercialized for home use. Role-playing games (RPG) were made popular by the best selling *Dungeons and Dragons*, inspired by J.R.R Tolkien’s high fantasy books. The highlight of what is known as the Golden Age of videogames was bestsellers like *PacMan*, a lasting influence on nowadays’ popculture.

Serious Games appeared by the end of the 80s. Tetris was the major success after being imported from the Soviet Union in 1988. The 1990s was referred to by Laird as the “Console Wars” witnessed the release of *Super Mario 3*, an all time bestseller game. SuperNES consoles were launched by Nintendo that “had higher

profits than all U.S. movie and TV studios combined” (Laird, 2006). In 1992, *Mortal Kombat* started a series of “extreme violence” videogame trend.

1994 was a turning point for videogames since two highly acclaimed and genre-defining games were born, *Doom* and *Myst*, the latter flipping the narrative/simulation balance in favour of atmospheric, complex narrative with puzzles as the play aspect. In the mid-90s, appeared Playstation, Nintendo 64 and multiplayer games, as well as *Legend of Zelda* engrossing revenue higher than any film of the 1998.

In 1999, a major Doom-clone was released, *Counter Strike*. Survival horror genre also became popular with titles such as Resident Evil and *Silent Hill*. The 2000s had the bestselling simulation game “*Sims*”, the follow up of *SimCity*, and *Diablo II*. *Grand Theft Auto III*, released in 2001, revolutionizing open-world games as well as non-linear narrative. Software development was fast-changing and more powerful gaming consoles were created following the growing demand and interest in the videogame industry as entertainment.

StarWars Galaxies was the second biggest and the fastest growing MMOG introducing transmedia narrative, after the release of *StarWars* movies. And in 2004, Sequels were made to SIMS, *Halo*, *Half-Life* and *Doom*. A year later, *World of Warcraft* had 4M subscribers.

Free casual games and mobile gaming appeared with social networks in the late 2000s (Laird, 2006) appealing to wider gaming audience with the accessibility of phones.

The internet allowed the establishment of online gaming stores that permitted for indie game developers to be viewed and sell their work (Donovan, 2010), giving rise to titles like *World of Goo* and eventually *Portal*, the groundbreaking narrative puzzle game taken up by Valve. The emergence of the indie game developers as competitors to AAA companies, the parallels of blockbuster companies in film, have changed the face of the videogame industry, despite famous titles still appealing to their fanbase encouraging sequels and clone-games, the videogame medium is fast

maturing into more “serious” games, with higher focus on narrative experiences that found ground among the vast and changing community of gamers, with games like *Skyrim*, *Heavy Rain*, *Alan Wake*, *L.A. Noir* and the likes.

1.6.2. The Genre Dilemma

Regardless of the medium, deciding on the stylistic categorisation has always been problematic for any emerging form of art, from literature to film before; videogames are facing the genre crisis.

What makes videogames different is that many aspects are in play, the genre could refer to the mechanics, the design, the experience, the gameplay, the player interaction or the goal. A videogame cannot just be “horror” for example, as the categorisation is based solely on atmospheric and narrative content, the player also requires knowing about the point of view, the gameplay mechanics and the goal.

Although ESA and the publishing companies have labels used for marketing purposes, videogames are, due to their nature, community-based due to the participatory age of the internet and in part to the lack of official and academic prescriptive guidelines on the matter, Sellers (2005) confirms that “the classification of video games into genres can be seen as a subjective practice, and the number of accepted game genres has evolved in recent years as games become more sophisticated and diverse” (Cited in Pinelle, Wong, & Stach, 2008).

Major entertainment and videogames rating and reviews websites have their own similar system of categorisation, however informal they might be, they fulfil the needs of the players. Websites such as gamespot.com and ign.com feature categories like: action, adventure, driving, puzzle, role-playing, simulations, sports, and strategy games. The problem with such categorization is that most video games could be put in at least two or three of those categories. Hence it cannot be considered as a reliable system for classification. The Entertainment Software Association came up with “super-genres” which are major genres under which many sub-genres fall.

Egenfelt-Niels, Smith, & Tosca, in their book *Understanding Video Games*, created a genre system based on a game's criteria for success. In other words, "What does it take to succeed in the game?" (2009, p. 41). For such purpose Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. provide a comparison between the famous game *Tetris* and *Myst*. The comparison showed that the criteria of success for these two games are completely different and hence they cannot be within the same genre. The system classifies videogames into four major genres and they are as follows:

Action games: These games are usually the "archetypical video game" according to Egenfelt-Niels et al. which are often based on intense fighting and some kind of "physical drama" (2009, p. 42).

Strategy games: Games wherein the player does not take part in the action but takes on a variety of roles from a general to a deity as he controls some in-game variables that determine the outcome of the videogame. And this genre has two sub-genres: **real-time strategy** and **turn-based strategy**.

Process-oriented games: Such videogames provide the player with more than just one goal and are often seen as having no ultimate aim but to entertain. These games often offer the player a "system to play with" (Egenfelt-Niels et al., 2009, p. 44). Most of these videogames are life-simulations and they mimic in a way a particular aspect of life and present it to the player. *The Sims*, for instance, is a life simulation where the player gets to create and manage, to a certain extent, the lives of the human simulation or "sim" he or she makes. Hence process-oriented games challenge the player not by giving him an "external enemy" but by "mastering the complexities of the interface" (Egenfelt-Niels et al., 2009, p.44).

Adventure games: games that revolve around exploration and require a great deal of logical thinking and deduction. Such skills are used to "participate in, or uncover, narratives that are often based on detective story templates" (Egenfelt-Niels et al., 2009).

Videogame genres, however, are still a “muddle” according to game designer Ernest Adams (2009) who compares them to those in Film and Literature. In literature, he observes, genre is defined by “subject matter” and “emotional tone” and “setting”, so we find thriller, romance, historical fiction, etc. In film, it is very similar, with the exception of the commonality of the comedy genre. However, in Videogames, interactivity adds another dimension to all of the above, so gameplay is set on top of a genre hierarchy.

Adams (2009) gives the example of two shooter games in two different settings still being put under the Shooters genre. He gives three additional aspects to take into consideration “themes”, “audience” and “purpose”, so genres like: politics, entertainment, games for girls, investigation, training, education, healthcare are found (Adams, 2009).

As games evolve, so does the market, and the gaming community. Players are more and more exigent of quality description and categorisation of genres.

1.6.3. Narrative in Videogames

The earliest videogames had little to no narrative, prompting early game theorists to make the popular assumption that narrative had no place in games.

Indeed, Juul and the ludologists advocated the view that ‘...game and narrative are two separate phenomena that in many cases rule each other out’ (Juul J. , 2001).

At first, early video games made with basic technology were presented in a set of controllable pixels on a screen and had superficial narrative consisting of protagonist and antagonist that only provided motive for play with examples like *PacMan*, *SuperMario Bros* and *Space Invaders*.

The first attempts making use of interactivity to tell story gave birth to the Interactive Fiction genre, namely *Zork*, a text-based non-linear story of an imaginative world that succeeded in telling compelling stories to players, but also

engaging them in discovering and actively thinking of ways to solve puzzles in the narrative.

During the 90s, videogame-making technology developed and with it did the stories that could be told. The boundaries of videogame narrative were pushed two and a half decades ago with the release of *Myst*, first-person exploration puzzle adventure developed and published by, Cyan, a team of nine indie game developers. *Myst* was before all an exploration of the videogame world itself, and what it can do in terms of interactive storytelling. The critical acclaim of the game resulted in many clones of the game and launched a series of experiments, more and more successful to incorporate story-rich worlds into games, for instance, *BioShock* or *Mass Effect*, and further than that, story-driven videogames with less and less gameplay.

However, as narrative became more and more appealing to the changing demographics of the gaming community, joining gameplay and narrative has not always been successful. In fact, the biggest challenge that developers face is incorporating a story in a way that is seamless and non-interruptive of play. The use of cut-scenes, which are non-interactive cinematic sequences in between gameplay became the conventional way to anchor the game and drive the story forward since the mid-1990s. Later on, storytelling in videogames evolved enormously, witnessing bolder and more experimental approaches to narrative design.

Nowadays, the most disputed issue among gamers and critics alike is whether videogames can and should be primarily mediums of storytelling and how narrative affects the “play” aspect of games. Concepts like non-game, interactive experience or art-game have emerged, as a consequence, to label games that focus on stories rather than gameplay.

Seen as “The game that started a genre” *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012); awarded Best Story/World and then Best Use of Narrative (French, 2012) initially started as an indie free downloadable mod of Half-Life in 2008 and witnessed several commercial releases throughout the years after the positive reception it had. The game was and still remains particularly controversial due to its limited game

controls and unusually minimal player interactivity with the game world. The gameplay consists mainly of a first-person controller simulating walking through a semi-open world. The game has sparked wide controversy and debate in social media, online forums and has reached the academia. The critical acclaim and commercial success of games like *Myst* and *Dear Esther* encouraged other developers to take the leap towards creating story-rich games, resulting in the highly successful series of videogames in the next year, namely *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), *The Stanley Parable* (Davy Wreden, 2013) and *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013). The following years prompted even more experimental and equally, if not more, successful games, among which many won the BAFTA Game Awards in the categories of Best Story then Best Narrative; titles such as Dontnod Entertainment's *Life Is Strange* (2015) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (GiantSparrow, 2017), winner of Best Game in 2018, and Best Narrative in The Game Awards of 2017.

Video games have come a long way from the days of *Pong* and *Pac-Man*, and not just in terms of graphical complexity. The games of today have come to rely more and more on the elements of fiction in their design, and they represent unexplored territory in studying the nature and impact of narrative (Ostenson, 2013, p. 71).

As developers and artists became conscious of the medium's potential for telling artful and engaging stories, experimenting became its main characteristics, although the early gaming community was mostly sceptic of the direction it was taking where play aspects were less present compared to stories, it allowed the industry to widen its horizons as well as its customer range and diversity appealing to a different kind of gamer, the story-aficionados, thirsty for an immersive novel experience made possible with technology.

1.7. Game Studies and the Study of Videogames

Videogames studies is a discipline that is, like the medium it is concerned with, still in its infancy but recognising the importance of videogames as artefacts led to

growing interest in the field in the past two decades, with digital games only being around for less than four decades.

The reconsideration of videogames by scholars was a result of a myriad of factors from the cultural to the economic, Newman (2004) gives three reasons to study videogames “the size of the videogames industry; the popularity of videogames; videogames as an example of human-computer interaction” (Cited in Esposito, 2005).

Indeed, according to the ESA, in the US only, the video game industry revenue has grown to 30.4 Billion from 23.5 Billion in 2015.

The second point Newman (2004) gives is the popularity of videogames. Unlike what is socially agreed upon, the assumption that video games’ main consumers are young boys is wrong. This was one of the “surprising” facts reported by ESA in its 2017 annual report. The “average gamer” is, in fact, 35 of age, with Adult women making up 31 percent of the game-playing community, a significantly larger portion than boys under 18 representing 18 percent (Entertainment Software Association, 2017).

This only serves to show the major role videogames are playing in all aspects: financial, social and cultural. Thus, the medium is witnessing growing academic interest manifested in the number of scholarly publications, conferences and majors on the field, shifting away from the early sociological and psychological research focusing on the –mostly negative- social, cultural and behavioral effects of videogames on youth and the society at large.

Leading Ludologist, Frasca (2003) gives a historical overview going over the earliest international conferences and workshops starting 2001, and the publication of “Game Studies”; first online scholarly journal of the field, he then observes:

After an early start as a subset of digital text studies, videogame studies is finding its own academic space. Probably the most promising change comes from a new generation of researchers

who grew up with computer games and now are bringing to this new field both their passion and expertise on this form of entertainment (p. 221).

It seems inconceivable to tackle the scholarly study of videogames without going into the debate that has been equated with it. The Ludology vs Narratology conflict has played a major role in the advancement –and sometimes hindering of– videogame study, by bringing attention into the medium itself and attracting more interest to the field. Major scholars have been labeled to belong to either sides of the discussion that has been taking place since the early 2000s.

The debate was considered the first “schism” of the field by prominent scholar Newman (2004), as to Jarvinen it is “an unfortunate by-product” that led to “a significant hesitance to consider any resemblance between videogames and other media, especially film and literature” (Cited in Clearwater, 2011). In fact, their aim is to prevent videogame studies from being “colonised” as they put it, by other cultural expressions and their way of study.

Eskelinen and the ludologiststs insist –with the exception of a few- that narrative only impedes the evolution of game studies, they claim, in Eskelinen’s words that: “gaming mechanisms are suffering from slow or even lethargic states of development, as they are constantly and intentionally confused with narrative or dramatic or cinematic mechanisms” (Cited in Clearwater, 2011, p.31).

Ludologists argue for a formalist criticism of games, starting from the idea that gameplay and player interaction is the primary feature of videogames that distinguish it from other media, thus emphasising the aspects related to “play”, like structure, mechanics, rules, goals, actions and consequences over other elements, namely narrative (story, themes, setting, characters) that, according to them, only serves as context for play.

Siding for Ludology also means to value simulation over representation and interpretation. To Frasca (2003), studying and viewing videogames as a narrative

medium restrict our understanding of it. He phrases his argument as such: “unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation” (p. 221-222). He gives an alternative to the “literary mind” put forward by Turner (1996) calling it the “simulational way of thinking” replacing narrative mechanism as cognitive structures, contending that narrative has become imbedded in human minds that they became unable to recognise alternative structures.

One of the flaws pointed out in their argument is the examples used to solidify them, games like Tetris or Chess are picked to illustrate the abstractness of games being essentially play, with a set of rules and outcomes. But when other, more recent video games that focus on narrative and comprise undeniable cultural properties are considered, most of the claims do not stand.

Even renowned Ludologists such as Aarseth J. Espen have since reconsidered the study of narrative elements in videogames, putting an end to the debate. This is what prominent researcher Janet H. Murray concludes in her essay entitled “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies”. Murray (2013) criticises the Game Essentialism and Ludology as a methodology calling for a unification of the field away from the unproductive conflict, stating that “Games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories” (para. 9).

Even after acknowledging the narrative function of videogames as an evolving feature that adds value to the medium without taking away from its gaming aspect, what it can be considered as and the lenses through which it can be tackled is still debatable and ambiguous given the characteristics differentiating videogames from previous art forms studied in the academia.

1.7.1. Textual Approach to Videogame Study

The relative newness of the videogame medium and its study sparked endless debates on the means used to study it. Several approaches, namely simulation, were proposed from the Ludology theorists, who resist employing methods used in other

media, instead suggesting proper and specific tools that analyse game mechanics, interactivity, and even aesthetics but still strictly in terms of play. But such approaches do little to tackle the stories told in games.

Other scholars proposed a textual approach that would consider videogames as texts, in the Barthesian meaning of the word, allowing for a critical reading and interpretation, evaluation and analysis.

Based on Fürsich's (2009) description of how Poststructuralism's influence had the effect that not only written material, but every cultural practice or product, could be analysed as text, and that every media content should be 'read' and not simply collected as data and objectively examined, Jennings (2015) concludes that:

Conducting a textual analysis means performing such a reading. The text may be an actual written text, or a media artifact, a practice, an action, an object, a video game—whatever can be read and analyzed as text in the poststructuralist understanding of the term (p. 4).

Simultaneously, Espen Aarseth (1997) argues for interactivity lacking "analytical substance" (p. 51). He suggests "cybertext" to describe the intricate feedback system that exists in certain types of texts that are characterized by a "mechanical organisation" and an "integrated" reader (1997, p. 1). He calls for the terminology 'ergodic' literature, to mean the interaction humans have with the text, where he participates in creating it. He points out that "non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1).

A clear example of digital literature is the hypertext fiction, which allows the reader to explore the text and its narrative in a non-linear way. In the case of videogames, however, Aarseth makes the distinction of those ergodic texts from literary texts in the sense that the reader/player is not simply an observer but an active contributor, whose actions affect the narrative, either in the way it is told or by directly impacting the outcomes (Cited in Ostenson, 2013).

With a background in narrative and critical theory, scholar Barry Atkins (2003) revolutionised the way videogames are studied in *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, in this book, he asserts the validity of videogames as text and denounces how it is “short sighted to ignore questions of how we 'read' computer texts [...] as it would be to ignore questions of just how we read other forms of popular text” (p. 6). He recognises that computer games differ from other representational media and conventional narrative forms in more than mere technicalities but still considers “the modern computer as a vehicle for the delivery of fictional texts” (p. 7).

With the consideration of games as texts, although with its own uniquely characterising elements, it becomes logical to apply established approaches in dealing with text, namely narrative theory.

1.7.2 Narrative Theory and Videogames

Narrative theory starts from the belief in the centrality of stories to humans; narrative is used to make sense of the world, to give shape to experiences and to transmit them. First initiated as a Structuralist practice, Narratology looks at the elements of narrative, its uses and effects in any form it may be.

At this point, there is no doubt that videogames can be considered a medium of storytelling, and that its narrative has matured enough to be studied beyond early stigmatised views that prevented this form of art from being properly explored.

Reinforcing McKeon’s view, leading Narratology theorist Monika Fludernik confirms that narrative is almost exclusively associated with the novel since literary narrative as an art form is considered prototypical. But narrative, as she highlights, is everywhere and can be found in a variety of text-types (Fludernik, 2006, p. 2).

In 1978, Chatman defined narrative as a “conjunction of discourse and story” as he broadened the definition to include media other than the purely verbal (oral and written) narrative discourse (Cited in Fludernik, 2006, p.5), saying: “Literary critics

tend to think too exclusively of the verbal medium, even though they consume stories daily through films, comic strips, paintings, sculptures, dance movements, and music” (Chatman, 1978).

Indeed, in the same context Belkhatir (2016) views Narratology as:

a non-exclusive study of story-telling platform such as literature, motion-picture, theatre, poetry and even interactive storytelling in video games, as they (scholars) realized that the analysis of a story structure is the best way to unravel its potential and intention (2016, p. 8).

So, Narratology is the theory of narrative wherever it is found, in the form of texts, images, spectacles, events and cultural artifacts. It aims at understanding, analysing and evaluating narratives (Bal, 1997).

But before analysing videogames, it is important to precise in which terms it is to be considered. The recognised traditional form is the text. According to Bal (1997) “a narrative “text” in which an agent relates a story in a particular medium, such as language imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (p.5).

Following this definition of “text”, videogames can be considered as texts that bear the story, or the “*fabula*”, which Bal (1997) defines as a series of logically and chronologically related events –transition from one state to another that are caused or experienced by actors –agents that perform actions-. Action itself is to cause or experience an event (p. 5). But what is important to note is that in Bal’s definition, a narrative text is only the story told in a medium. Narratology seems to overlook the medium, and in the case of videogames, some aspects are what makes it different and enables it to tell the story effectively although in a dissimilar way, that might just be its strongest feature, such as interactivity and the addition of other arts such as artful images and music.

Fludernik (2006) provides a definition of narrative that seems better fit to be applied to videogame with slight alterations related to interactivity, narrative,

according to her, is “a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium” with characters performing actions at the center of a spatiotemporal sense, the focus “allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists” (2016, p. xii).

Narratologist Janet H. Murray (2016) suggests:

a postmodern critical framework that emphasizes the more flexible, kaleidoscopic thinking about human experience that computer-based narrative formats could help us to achieve. The “cognitive turn” in literary studies of the past fifteen years has reinforced my confidence in the possibility of a more integrative cultural discourse (p. xii)

This statement calls for a consideration of a theory of gaming that is moving forward towards a more literary view in criticising the art form. E.M. Forster confirms saying, “Indeed the more the arts develop the more they depend on each other for definition.” (1990, p. 102) Thus, it opens the door for a consideration of videogames as narrative art to be studied in cultural and literary terms beyond prejudice and stigma surrounding the alleged inferiority of videogames, starting with an inclusive narrative theory that borrows aspects of other arts into the scholarly study of games.

1.8. Conclusion

This chapter was an exploration of the main concepts this study is concerned with related to literature and, its main genre, the novel as a prototype of narrative fiction with its traditional aspects later deconstructed by postmodernism, this was in contrast with videogames as an art genre with its own specificities of form and genres as well as the progression it witnessed both as medium and study, in addition to similarities in terms of storytelling, with a superficial look onto the vast theory of narrative, all of which will be crucial for the building of arguments in the second chapter of this research paper.

**Chapter Two: A
Novel Analysis of
Narrative
Videogames**

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2.1. Introduction

Discussions surrounding videogames tend to turn around what videogames do, but are rarely about what they can be. This chapter is an exploration of videogames as a narrative medium with literary aspects and how they resemble those found in the novel form. By applying the literary theory to videogames, conclusions can be drawn on whether videogames can be considered as part of Literature, or not. A literature that is different in nature but shares the essential elements of older literary forms adding its own to create interactive stories that are engaging and immersive. The main videogames which will be subjected to literary analysis is the ground-breaking *Dear Esther*, which mostly resembles postmodern novels, in addition to other story-based games which will also be used as illustrations of certain aspects.

2.2. Dear Esther, the Videogame

Since its inception in 2008 as an independently developed free to play mod for Source, game engine used in *Half-Life*, on moddb.com, *Dear Esther* had overwhelmingly positive reviews with a rating of 59% being 10/10 (Gursoy, 2013). As a result, the game had a commercial release four years later on Steam. Another four years further, a re-mastered landmark edition was launched on other gaming platforms in 2016 using Unity engine. Now, the fully developed videogame is still subject to debate in the gaming community and academia alike.

In fact, the game itself was born out of the academia. It was in the process of exploring storytelling as a function of game play that the academic project *Dear Esther* was created by Dan Pinchbeck, a researcher based at the University of Portsmouth, writer, creative director, producer and co-head of The Chinese Room¹, while writing his PhD funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council in 2007 (The Chinese Room, 2012). He explains during his talk at Game City Nights how he

¹ The Chinese Room: An independent videogame development studio based in the United Kingdom, famous for making *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*.

wanted to make his research about videogame practical and something that players, critics and even academics could actually experience rather than read about. But even further, Pinchbeck's purpose was to make videogame creators look at games differently by actually making one and prove how, if stripped down of all what is conventional in an FPS, games could still be engaging to the player who could be immersed in the story and game world alone, without any action distractions, only atmospheric experience (Pinchbeck, 2012).

The title was the forerunner of several games that would imitate the storytelling tradition innovated by the developers who drew a new outlook towards videogame making and reception.

2.2.1. Dear Esther's Controversy

Dear Esther is not a videogame that can leave a person indifferent. It is hard to define and harder to categorise in terms of medium, genre, and even art. For a discussion to be held about the game, however, delving into the controversy is hardly escapable.

While the videogame is certainly a story, questions arise on whether or not it is actually a game eliciting a debate the title has come to be most known for.

Games are goal-oriented and while on hindsight it seems as if "Walking Simulators", as similar videogames have come to be pejoratively labelled, have no objective, piecing together the story and engaging in the making of the plot can be considered as one. The developer's intent was to pare the game experience until there is nothing left but the story. Since traditional games would increase the difficulty by increasing the stimulation of harder enemies and obstacles to overcome, *Dear Esther* focuses more on minimising the stimuli and giving the player more time and space to ponder and make sense of what he is experiencing. In other words, the story gets increasingly harder to understand in order to create a sense of difficulty throughout the game experience. This is arguably what gives the game its ludic aspect. As the game or the story do not progress unless the player chooses to take a certain path or the other which generates a specific audio segment that tells a randomly generated

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fragment of the story. This highlights Interactivity, Randomness and Goal. Some of the remaining aspects of a game are Rules and Unnecessary Limitations, while *Dear Esther* does not have instructions, the player cannot, for example, go underwater except in a few intended scenes, and the player does not die by falling or drowning, he is immediately brought back into the closest place he was in after hearing the words “come back”. Unnecessary limitations are there since the game could be made much easier by reading the script and seeing images of the landscape, but the game developers chose to tell the story in the videogame format that creates boundaries not found in real life for the process of discovering the tale to be challenging.

Simply put, despite making different demands from the player than the common videogame, especially FPS games, based on which the game was built, *Dear Esther* is a game when considering its formal aspects as Destructoid reviewer Allistair Pinfof concludes, “there are rules and keys and narrative triggers” that have come to be expected when purchasing a videogame (Pinfof, 2012). It is a game, only not in the traditional sense.

The gameplay is indeed fairly minimalistic, with the only possible player interaction being directing the player-character by pressing the movement buttons simulating the walking action in four directions, and looking around through a first person point of view by using the mouse or alternatively the joystick depending on the console. A zoom feature is also available for a closer examination of the objects around. An occasional flashlight is automatically turned on when exploring dark places.



Figure 2: Objects in the game world can be explored but not interacted with.²

As a result, the game is often dismissed as simply a “Walking Simulator”. In an interview with Euogamer’s Chris Bratt, The Chinese Room developers Jessica Curry and Dan Pinchbeck as well as *Dear Esther* artist responded to the labelling of their game by stating that the game is without a doubt different but it is still a game, taking the word “game” to be a broad term that can include all variations of the genre. In his intervention during the interview, Pinchbeck asserts that “diversity can only be a good thing” in the videogame industry, appealing to a wider and more diverse gaming community. They went on to express their pride in how the game challenged the industry, and beyond, the preconceptions of what a game can be and what it could be about, sparking discussions in the academia making it relevant in a fast changing scene (Pinchbeck, Curry, & Briscoe, 2016).

The other controversy the game presents when approached as a text, is its randomness and non-linearity. This challenges attempts at clearly grasping the story or analysing it, but it is not impossible after several playthroughs and a reading of the arranged game script. The written script itself is not enough, because videogames

² <http://dearesther.wikia.com>

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employ a multimedia narrative that consists of text, graphics, sounds, mechanics and interactivity. Thus, an examination of the whole work that we call a videogame is the right way to approach it, since every aspect contributes in making the story. Thus, narrative design cannot be separated from the game design. The importance of the playthrough is an emphasis on the Interactivity aspect of the medium. Unlike other storytelling mediums like books, or movies, videogames give players agency which makes the “reader” an active participant in the making of the story, but also, in the case of *Dear Esther*, the making of meaning.

2.2.2. Story

“The stories we read in computer games are not just pale reflections of novels, plays, films, or television programmes, but they have a different relationship with both other textual forms and the ‘real world’” (Atkins, 2003, p. 6).

Where videogames are expected to have a fairly simple story that only drives gameplay forward providing context to keep the player engaged in the game world, *Dear Esther* is highly experimental, especially for a videogame, in terms of narrative. Addressing the reluctance of the videogame industry in tackling literary-like narratives, narrative designer and game developer Tom Jubert observes: “So much literary fiction is centred around human relationships, and human relationships are famously the hardest thing to systemise and mechanise in a game. It's only natural that the (gaming) industry focuses on shooting and climbing rather than talking” (Cited in Eurogamer, 2014).

However, *Dear Esther* unveils the potential of games in telling stories that are typical of and seemingly exclusive to other forms of narrative fiction, specifically literature and recently film.

In the manner of the novel, the game story seems to draw from the postmodern narrative techniques in a lot of its aspects. The word that best describes the story is Fragmentation, which exists in several layers of the game, from the mechanic and the visual to the narrative and the language itself.

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It is often described as a “ghost story”, not because it is about ghosts, although some people would argue to have seen or experienced them, but because the story is intangible and fading. The developers of *Dear Esther*, like postmodern writers, defy notions of plot, characters and chronology of narrative purposefully rendering the story an interpretable subjective conception. Pinchbeck explains that “the whole point being is that every player creates their own experience and creates their own story” (Pinchbeck, 2012) bringing to one’s mind Barthesian concept of death of the author and the creation of meaning in the text by the reader-player.

The story is told mainly through the voiceover cues that are triggered in certain parts of the game space, but also through the combination of that narration with the visuals and sounds which contribute to the meaning making in parallel to the written script.

Like the earliest novel, *Dear Esther* is a story told in an epistolary form. Fragments of letters or journal entries to a woman named Esther are read throughout the game combined with the setting, the player is meant to patch the story together by exploring a desolate island in the Outer Hebrides of northern Scotland. The game is split into four chapters each with its unique time sequence, landscape and music.

At its core, *Dear Esther* is a story about a man who lost Esther, the woman he loved, who was possibly pregnant, in a car accident and the journey of his struggle to overcome that trauma. He might have been drunk in that accident and feels responsible for it. The whole game might be seen as a metaphor for his psychological journey towards acceptance of what had happened, overcoming his guilt and grief symbolised by his metaphorical suicide in an island that could be a construction of his own mind. However, this is only one of the many interpretations of what the overarching story is; as the details make it far more complex.

The more complex narrative would be about an unknown narrator stranded on an island seemingly running from something that has been haunting him making his one-way journey to his eventual demise all the while addressing both his beloved and the player while in a dream-like state of delirium that could be caused by the

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medication he takes for his infection: “I swallow fistfuls of painkillers to stay lucid. In my delirium...” (The Chinese Room, 2012) Another interpretation would be that his nonsensical narration is due to the fever he suffers from caused by his infection making him hallucinate about the whole island.

The island is filled with relatively unusual yet specifically placed objects such as a paper-boat armada in the caves and in the sea; painting cans which are scattered all over the island; scribbles on the cliffs and inside the caves of electric diagrams, symbols of neurons and a multitude of chemical substances such as alcohol, some fragmented quotes from the Bible and even some ghostly apparitions. All of these hint at the narrator’s back story and can be considered manifestations of his grief and guilt. Hence the player might also be experiencing a geo-psychological representation of the narrator’s mind state.

Besides the narrator, other characters are mentioned in the narration: Donnelly, Jacobson, Paul, the Hermit and Esther. Legion of theories exist on which one is a real character and which one is not. This was intentionally done by the developers because to them the story *is* the gameplay as the creator of *Dear Esther*, Dr Dan Pinchbeck, said in one of his interviews with IGN: “Story is simply a tool which enables us to create an experience” (Onyett, 2012). Therefore, most theories would be an acceptable suggestion.

One theory suggests that with the exception of Esther, all of the characters represent a facet of the narrator’s mind that has been fractured with grief and guilt. Another would claim that the island could be a representation of his shattered psyche because of the noticeably split and in a binary opposition of the themes narrated moving from and south side to the north side.

The north side for Paul and the south side for Donnelly; the southern side being prevailed by themes of solitude grief and death that represent the irrational and traumatized side of the narrator and the northern side which is filled with themes of rebirth and resurrection. But before reaching the north side the narrator has to go across a network of cave tunnels.

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In the caves, the player has to make high waterfall jumps. One jump in particular seems too high than the other ones, and to show its importance and significance to it, as he reaches the water below, the narrator is pulled into a scene of a highway accident in Exeter which is the cause of death of his dear Esther and the crux of the narrative.

The whole scene is underwater as if the memory of it has been blurred and drowned, possibly from his addiction to alcohol and implying that he was drunk at the time of the accident, or because the narrator refuses to face the memory for the pain it holds. Just a few seconds later, the narrator wakes up back in the caves.

As he emerges on the north side, night had already fallen and the gloomy afternoon clouds dissipated with a clear night sky with a full moon taking its place; the beacon which seemed far at the beginning of the game is then ever close and getting closer. The narrator making his way to his final transformation reaches the beacon and only one thing remains for him: to rid himself of this world of grief and guilt and be reunited with his beloved Esther. As he ascends the tower, he gives his final monologue.

He speaks of relinquishing his belongings, his impending demise and of his legacy. To his left Esther Donnelly, a symbol of his emotional instability and his darkness being put in parallel to his love: On his right, Paul Jacobson and his sorrowful journey of a transformed man yet ultimately ending broken and alone. As he falls he soars again free of pain and suffering and unburdened by both of them.

2.2.3. Characters

Due to the unreliable narration, and the developers' choice in making the game a first person narrative with no other living being making appearance in the game world, not even the player-character, it is impossible to say for sure how many distinct characters there are in the game story. From all the names referred to by the narrator, there are six "people", none of which are encountered in the game world, Esther, Paul, Donnelly, Jakobson, the Hermit and the narrator who refers to himself in first person insinuating at being the protagonist.

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These characters may or may not be separate individuals as there might be possible combinations of them. A theory suggests that they could all converge into one person or that they are intercalated two at a time, which means that there are only two ‘real’ individuals, the narrator, who is Esther’s lover/husband and Esther herself. In this game even the island could be considered a character.

2.2.3.1. Narrator

The narrator can be assumed to be what is traditionally known in videogames as the player-character, whom the player controls. He is, in fact, a nameless, characterless entity navigating the story. The game is in first person view and the player sees through his eyes, yet he cannot see the player-character avatar, hence to the player, the narrator does not possess a virtual representation.

The narrator was in a relationship with a woman named Esther, he reads his letters to her, and is assumed to be her husband from the hints given in the narration, like the following passage which indicates that they shared a home: “Dear Esther. This will be my last letter. Do they pile up even now on the doormat of our empty house? Why do I still post them home to you? Perhaps I can imagine myself picking them up on the return I will not make, to find you waiting with daytime television and all its comforts” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

As the story progresses, the narrator is evidently depressed, filled with anguish and regret over the death of his beloved, Esther, in a car crash. In a playthrough, the narrator admits he was drunk, causing the accident. This theory is supported by the passage: “I was drunk when I landed here, and tired too” (The Chinese Room, 2012) and in other playthroughs the audio clip changes and he is revealed to be sober. Also, by “landed here” he refers to the island which could be a construct of his own mind to escape his guilt, or a sort of physical representation of the passage between life and death as he seems to be dying.

It becomes clear that there is a reality-breaking further along the story; the narrator’s change of tone hints at that. His monologues start with a calm and

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composed voice, more or less realistic and understandable and end with a frantic and paranoid voice that does not seem to make any sense.

It can be progressively deduced that the narrator is mentally and emotionally unstable; especially as he starts to confuse his own self with the other characters he narrates raising the possibility of a psychological personality disorder.

The narrator is a well versed man and his letters are dense with figures of speech from metaphors and similes. This can be due to his keenness on reading and studying history as he mentions visiting the library, and reading Donnelly's historical records on the island. He even quotes the bible which might suggest that he adheres to the Christian religion or at least has a profound interest in Christianity, especially in his final moment or to cope with the trauma.

2.3.3.2. Esther

Esther is the deceased wife of the protagonist. She died in the car accident involving the narrator. "[...] I was waiting for you to be cut out of the wreckage. The car looked like it had been dropped from a great height." And in another passage "[...] and you were rendered opaque by the car of a drunk"(The Chinese Room, 2012). She was born with a birthmark on her face which had faded away before she met the narrator. Whilst exploring the island, the player may encounter a number of photos of a woman scattered all over. The photos are somewhat roughed and blurry not allowing a clear view of what she looked like.



Figure 3: A possible Polaroid photograph of Esther

There is also the theory of her being pregnant since the player does come across some ultrasound photos of a baby. The photos are placed in the hut on the top of the cliff and another one in the caves. This would suggest that the world of the narrator keeps reminding him of her and probably their unborn child in more ways than just his thoughts but manifested in actual images.



Figure 4: A photo of the ultrasound that could be Esther's unborn child

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Esther is also referred to as “Esther Donnelly” in the end. This would suggest that Donnelly might be her ancestor or that they might be the same person in the narrator’s head.

2.2.3.3. Paul

Paul is the character who is held accountable for Esther death. The narrator informs about him working in a pharmaceutical company. On the day of the accident, while coming from a conference in Exeter; Paul’s car collides with the narrator and Esther’s. The protagonist visits him in his house in Wolverhampton after the accident in an attempt to come to terms with what happened and to find peace within himself.

During that visit, he also learns that Paul was not drunk at the time of the accident as he: “had kept a careful eye on his intake” of alcohol before taking the wheel. (The Chinese Room, 2012)

The name Paul was not a random choice; it is rather a reference to the biblical Paul the Apostle making his way to Damascus. He even refers to be him being resurrected after he was: “lifeless for twenty-one minutes” (The Chinese Room, 2012). In this sense he represents the narrator’s rational, remorseful and religious side as well as the courageous one as he is more willing to face the trials and jump into a black hole into the island’s underground caves. The Paul aspect of the narrator is therefore the opposite of another character, Donnelly.

At times, the narrator does not distinguish between himself and Paul, he says: “I find myself increasingly unable to find that point where the hermit ends and Paul and I begin” (The Chinese Room, 2012). Which either means that they are the same person or that they are two different individuals and the narrator is empathetic towards Paul. Another possibility arises being that the two personalities fused at the moment of collision.

2.2.3.4. Donnelly

Donnelly is the author who visited the island back in the eighteenth century, intrigued to investigate the famous legend of the hermit. His journey ending in failure,

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Donnelly explores the island wide and far collecting information about it and its people. The result is a book he entitled “A Hebridean History” which serves as a guide book for the narrator.

Donnelly’s narration seems to prevail in the first two chapters and the south side of the island. The narrator admits that Donnelly never saw the caves (which are the third and fourth chapters) and never reached the northern side: “Reading Donnelly by the weak afternoon sunlight. He landed on the south side of the island, followed the path to bay and climbed the mount. He did not find the caves and he did not chart the north side” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

However, Donnelly seems to have made it across the caves with the narrator. As he ascends the tower beacon the narrator says: “Dear Esther. I find each step harder and heavier. I drag Donnelly’s corpse on my back across these rocks, and all I hear are his whispers of guilt, his reminders, his burnt letters, his neatly folded clothes...” (The Chinese Room, 2012). Donnelly, therefore, is put into question on whether he was ever a real in-game author of the book that the narrator once read, or simply a representation of the narrator’s irrational and alcoholic side, a side that weighs on him.

Besides being an alcoholic, Donnelly also suffers from a laudanum addiction as a result of his sickness of the syphilis: “What to make of Donnelly? The laudanum and the syphilis” (The Chinese Room, 2012) which ultimately affected his reliability as a writer.

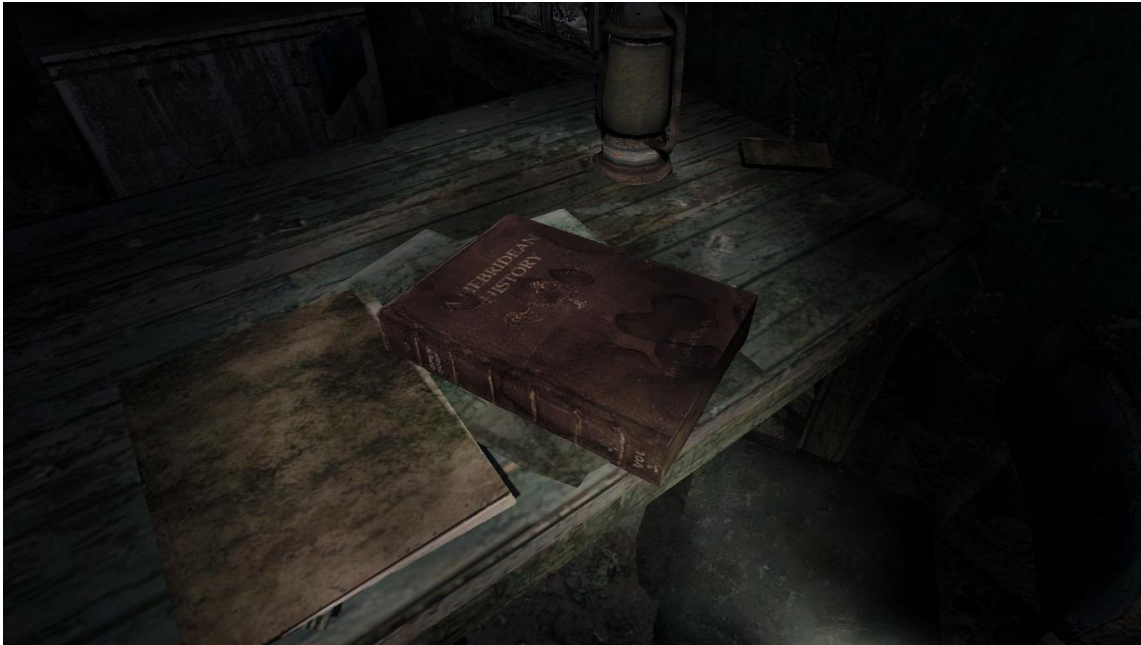


Figure 5 Donnelly's Book, *A Hebridean History*

The book written by Donnelly can be found on a table in an abandoned house as well as scattered at the entry of a cave but due to his hallucinations or madness, the story and its author had blurred in his mind making the truth indiscernible.

2.2.3.5. Jakobson

Jakobson is a shepherd who lived contemporary to Donnelly who took an interest in him and documented his life. In his book, he describes him to be of Scandinavian decent with a deformed ribcage as a result of an injury as a kid. He records that he came to the island in search of stability; to find a suitable wife and make a family. For that purpose, he intended to build a house on top of the cliff.

Whether it was his deformed ribcage or the fact that he was an outsider, he was shunned by all of the inhabitants; he was forced to live in isolation. The shepherd, still clinging to hope, built himself a house on an isolated cliff realizing that all of his plans were ruined.

The Shepherd's demise seems to be a point of contradiction since Donnelly's sickness and addiction was getting the best of him by the end of his book. He mentions that:

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“They found Jakobson in early spring, the thaw had only just come. Even though he’d been dead nearly seven months, his body had been frozen right down to the nerves and had not even begun to decompose [...]” (chineseroom, 2009)

This passage is mentioned in the beginning of three other audio clips. In all of them the fact that he had died for seven months to be found frozen is repeated which could mean that the narrator (Donnelly) was sure about this information. The last part, however changes in all of them. With each audio clip the player imagines Jakobson’s death a little bit differently. The first would suggest that he died whilst looking for one of his goats going halfway *down* the cliff, and collapsed in the process:

“[...] He’d struggled halfway down the cliff path, perhaps looking for some lost goat, or perhaps in a delirium and expired, curled into a claw, right under the winter moon. Even the animals shunned his corpse; the mainlanders thought to bring it home unlucky. Donnelly claims they dragged it to the caves to thaw out and rot, but he is proving an unreliable witness” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

In another audio clip he seems to have died whilst exploring the caves, and the villagers find phosphorescent moss of the caves underneath his fingernails. He tries to go halfway *up* the cliff and dies there:

“[...] His fingernails were raw and bitten to the quick; they found the phosphorescent moss that grows in the caves deep under the nails. Whatever he’d been doing under the island when his strength began to fail is lost. He’d struggled halfway up the cliff again, perhaps in a delirium, perhaps trying to reach the bothy’s fire, before curling into a stone and expiring” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

In the last audio clip, the narrator describes more of the life around and after the death of Jakobson; as if the world would not suffer if he died or lived. Hence the mainlanders tossed his body into a bottomless shaft:

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“[...] All around him, small flowers were reaching for the weak sun, the goats had adjusted happily to life without a shepherd and were grazing freely about the valley. Donnelly reports they hurled the body in fear and disgust down the shaft, but I cannot corroborate this story” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

At the end Jakobson is referred to by the narrator as Paul Jacobson. Again, whether these two characters seem to have things in common in the narrator’s head or he is simply a delirious madman, it is not clear.

2.2.3.6. The Hermit

The legendary hermit is a wise man who ran away from everything seeking solitude as his only companion. Much of his story is reported by Donnelly in his book. He seems to be a pious and religious man to the locals of the island as they try to gain his favor. They would often times lay gifts at his cave which he never takes, this fact refuting the possibility of his existence.

The Hermit seems to possess some kind of unnatural powers. The narrator describes him as having come to the island in a “bottomless boat” in hopes to “converse with the sea creatures” (The Chinese Room, 2012). The island also seems to comply to his will for it opened its cliffs and provided him with shelter. He died after a “hundred and sixteen years” living on that island, which makes him over a hundred and sixteen years old. Not common on an island in which the inhabitants were plagued by death.

The narrator seems to confound between himself and the hermit: “I find myself increasingly unable to find that point where the hermit ends and Paul and I begin. We are woven into a sodden blanket, stuffed into the bottom of a boat to stop the leak and hold back the ocean” (The Chinese Room, 2012). Whether the narrator seems to be empathetic towards the hermit or that he is the hermit himself is not clarified as the story progresses. It could be possible that the hermit never existed or that he is all of the male characters as he embodies their solitude on the island.

2.2.3.7. The Island as a Character

In the traditional sense, the setting of a story is simply a backdrop of where the story takes place. With the coming of the postmodern movement and how it radically redefined all boundaries of a narrative structure, setting has become much more than a simple static and somewhat ‘dead’ geographical location of a story.

As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, settings come to life in postmodern writings. The place would feel like a character because of the vast effort that the postmodern writer puts into its details and in how those details change throughout the story as well as invoke emotions in one of the other characters and how these emotions are tethered to the reader. They give a sense that there is interplay between character and setting, making the setting a character in itself: “[settings] they become metaphors, possibly even actors in the drama” (Maass, 2013, p. 81). This aspect has seeped through and into all other mediums of storytelling, including videogames.

In *Dear Esther* place seems to have a mind of its own, rather literally. The different environments of the island contain a dozens of context related items such as photos, candles, books etc. which the island intentionally confuses the player with by varying them with each playthrough. This changes the meaning behind those items as well as the traditional view of what a setting should be, because the island not only changes throughout the story but it also gets to choose *how* to change, which can only be possible in videogame. This is usually a trait of a character in a narrative and not a setting.

The narrator seems to characterize the island in the story and he says: “I sat at the edge and I watched the idiot buoy blink through the night. He is mute and he is retarded and he has no thought in his metal head but to blink each wave and each minute aside until the morning comes and renders him blind as well as deaf-mute.” There are many instances in which he refers to it as a person too; giving it human traits like being born: “I sometimes feel as if I’ve given birth to this island” and even

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human organs: “I have stolen them away to the guts of this island.” and: “Seal you into the belly of the island” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

He also compares it to himself: “Just as I am becoming this island” (The Chinese Room, 2012) which would imply that the island is a facet of the narrator. Its physical attributes mirroring himself and his mental and emotional state of isolation, sadness and madness. As the narrator’s passages and tone become intense, so do the unrealistic elements of the island which become more random and exaggerated, from the cave fluorescent paintings of electric diagrams and chemical substances, to the words and the long sentence quotes from the bible on the rocks. The scenery is very melancholic and haunting. And the absence of any living thing makes the player immerse into the nothingness and void of the island with the sea on every side of it making him feel entrapped as the narrator is.

Including all these criteria the game also gives the island a past. As the narrator walks this island he reads passages of its history giving it the dimension of time. This aspect is very important since it gives the player a more realistic and personal view of this character-like island.

In general, the island of *Dear Esther* seems to have a personal past; it has been referred to as a person and as one of the narrator’s facets several times throughout the game; It also invokes emotions in the narrator as a character and the player throughout its random selective placement of story related items; through the intricate attention paid in the design of its graphic details; the music changes to each scenery to create a haunting yet beautiful atmosphere. All these aspects seem to bring the island to life.

Similarly, the game *Bio Shock: Infinite* takes place on a floating city named Columbia. When the player reaches the city it appears to be a very calm and peaceful haven for a group of selected people; shops filled with smiling faces, streets beaming with life; kids playing by a fountain; sounds of birds and even a carnival festival was in town. By the end of the game, the city is thrown into disarray; its shops and houses abandoned; its people nearly all dead; the sounds of birds replaced with laser beams and most of its landmarks destroyed. This is to show how much the player’s actions,

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as he goes through the game have affected every detail of the setting. This action and reaction between the player and the place invokes emotions in characters.

In Columbia, there is a big statue of an angel-like being on the top of the city which constructed in the image of Elizabeth (the daughter of the antagonist Comstock and the girl-to-be-freed by the protagonist Booker Dewitt) As the player destroys that monument Elizabeth gets terribly sad even though she hated it. The scene of its destruction is so moving and epic that it cannot but invoke emotions in both the characters as well as the player. Hence the dynamic of the place affected by the action of the player greatly affect the experience of the characters. This makes the setting more of a character than a static lifeless place.

2.3. Aspects of *Dear Esther*

Similar to novels, videogames' stories contain an abundant number of aspects that constitute any story; the time and geographical span, the plot and the narrator as well as the style of narration. In *Dear Esther* all of the previously mentioned aspects are to be analyzed and discussed in a detailed manner.

2.3.1. Settings

Time and space are both the dimensions that form the fabric of existence in real life as well as in a work of fiction. Therefore, the notion of the two is of a great importance in constructing a fictitious world for it slips the reader into the milieu in which the events occur (Lodge, 1992, pp. 58 - 60).

Both of these two variables play a great role in shaping a story for both contribute in shaping events and their interpretations.

2.3.1.1. Time

Given the fact that events cannot happen without time passing, the aspect of time in any narrative is important, especially when the narrative is of a postmodern era. Postmodern writers and artists in general experimented with the notion of time and how it affects storytelling.

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Although in real life time flows like a stream and in one direction, postmodern writers reject it. They insist that time is relative and human beings experience it differently. Being in a comfortable situation might make time seem as if it flies by and vice versa; being in a bad situation might make it seem go slower. This idea of time relativity was reflected in their works.

The time span of the game is about two hours depending on how the player chooses to explore the island. The game's story of a single play through however, goes back and forth in time from contemporary times to an eighteenth century historian then to 1974 and back to a shepherd in the eighteenth century etc. The game also includes a flashback of the narrator's painful past which further emphasizes the developer's intention to experiment with the notion of time in the game.

The majority of the island exploration takes less than a day in the game. The player starts while the sun is about to set. As he moves along the island from level to level there is an obvious change in time; from dusk to reach the ending at midnight. This change from day to night accompanies the intensity of the narration, the place and narrative tone as well as the meaning that becomes darker.

As much as the notion of time is important in a postmodern work, the geographical location of the story is as or even more important.

2.3.1.2. Place

The game takes place on an inspired Scottish Hebridean Island. It features a lot of dry grass foliage, vines rocks, rivers, sharp cliffs, shafts, fossils, caves and a mountain as a focal point and a lot more. However, the island seems to lack in any tree formations or urban life; there is no sign of a history of life on it, except a house on the top of one of the cliffs, a lighthouse and a small cemetery, as well as a wrecked ship.

The island is divided according to the existing chapters (or levels) with each representing a unique landscape.

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The lighthouse: The lighthouse is where the player stands in the beginning. It features a lighthouse with broken staircases and a small old cemetery on top of the hill.

The Buoy: The Buoy includes a rocky side of the island with dozens of shipwrecks and an abandoned house on a cliff.

The Cave: The cave is a network of caves completely under the island. It features a lot of luminescent cave chambers as well as a lot of waterfalls and slippery edges.

The Beacon: The final chapter includes a pathway of candles with a full moon and a clear night sky. On the top of the highest mountain in the island there is the beacon and the radio mast, this is where the journey of the narrator ends.

In addition to these places, there is a dreamlike flashback scene which is clearly located somewhere far from the island. It features a highway with two cars crashed between Exeter and Bristol. The whole scene is submerged underwater and in another playthrough there is an operating table in the middle of the road.

Even though these places are seen through the player's eyes, the narrator is self-aware that they are not real: "But I have been here and I know, as Donnelly did, that this place is always half-imagined" (The Chinese Room, 2012). This means that the island might exist in reality and that he might have physically visited it at some point in the past but he is not sure that what he is seeing now is real or imagined as he might simply be projecting unrealistic objects and images into the island as he once knew or simply read about it.

2.3.2. The Plot

E.M Forster defines a plot as: "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" (Forster, 1990). In *Dear Esther*, temporal distortion as well as non-linear narration and fragmentation of the text have an immense effect on the chain of causality. In fact, it affects it to an extent to which the story becomes seemingly plotless. Even then narrator is unreliable, therefore, cannot be trusted for the

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authenticity of his words. Thus, the player/reader struggles to find meaning and discover what is true and what is not. The game story does not follow a logical order nor a clear line of causality, thus identifying the traditional elements of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution are a challenge if not quasi-impossible.

The events are fragmented bits of a man grieving the death of his lover, who came to an island to die, all the while narrating non-related stories of a legendary hermit who came to the island seeking solitude; a shepherd who sought to create family and died in the process; a drug addicted eighteenth century author who documented the island's history in a book; and a man who might have caused the death of a woman named Esther in a car crash.

The closest attempt to link them would be to say it is a story of a man and his pregnant wife who get in a car accident because either the man is drunk or the other driver, Paul, is. This misfortunate event turns the narrator's life upside down as he is haunted by the memory of the crash and filled with guilt and sorrow. His trauma coupled with unresolved grief cause him to become ill, both mentally and physically, he becomes overmedicated and delirious as he writes letters to his beloved deceased wife, Esther. He constructs an imagined version of an isolated island he read about in a book he stole; that seems to fit his mental state of complete loss, isolation and entrapment in the past. He starts blurring the lines between reality and fiction incorporating images of the crash, the names of the characters in the book, its author, and the car's driver, as well as his own wife's into his narration of events in his last moments. The narrator's state becomes worse with each letter he reads out loud while exploring the island, the fragments making less sense with every word. It reaches the point of culmination with the narrator completely losing his mind while simultaneously being relieved from his grief by going over his memories and telling the story the only way he can deal with. This is symbolised by him reaching the beacon at the end, he climbs to the highest points of the island, the aerial tower from which he throws himself but without falling to his death, he flies over the shore of the island moving over a candle lit harbour-like path where the fleet of letters folded in

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paper boats are set to sail on the waters. The narrator, transformed into a gull, flies far off into the moon and is released from the island and all it represents.

Otherwise, nothing assures the player whether the narrator is alive or not; the characters he mentions do not interact with one another; there is no climactic moment in the story; and the narrator cannot be entrusted because he himself might be delusional, hence making his story unreliable.

However plotless the story seems, the creator of the game Dr Dan Pinchbeck stated that: "we basically decided we had to give you the tools to create your own version of what's going on...It's about creating a space with these ideas in, and your interpretation of it is as valid as anyone's, including the author's" (Oxford, 2015). In other words, the construction of the plot, and the linking causality to each event, is a result of each and every player's efforts and understanding of the game. He also claims that there is no *fixed* interpretation of those events. Thus, every possible construction of the plot is just as valid as the author's.

2.3.3. Narration

Human life in general is one big story. Every action or event that has ever happened has been recounted in a form of a story because human minds need to find a link between events and arrange them in a specific order to make sense of the world around them.

The act of telling a story is often tethered to reading a children's bedtime story, or recounting a novel to someone, or even reporting historical events. Narration as Monica Fludernik suggests: "is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is [...] to be found wherever someone tells us about something: a newsreader on the radio, a teacher at school...etc" (2006, p. 1).

In literature, narratology is the term used for narrative theory which is: "the study of narrative as a genre." With the objective "to describe the constants and variables and combinations typical to narrative" (Fludernik, 2006, p. 8).

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There are a number of constants and variables that constitute a narrative which give each literary era its distinctiveness. In the postmodern era, unlike any former literary eras, witnessed a colossal experimentation on every constituent (whether constant or variable) of the narrative. Nonlinear storytelling and the unreliable narrator were one of the changes that befell the act of narration.

2.3.3.1. Non-linear storytelling

Commonly, stories are narrated by linking events following a straight path timeline creating the various parts of a plot. However, this technique was challenged in the postmodern era. Post-modern artists tended to resist their predecessors' techniques, and nonlinear narration was particularly commonly employed during the time.

The narration in *Dear Esther* is not sequential and linear but rather generated through an algorithm in the game's mechanics. A similar style of narration could be found in most postmodern novels such as Renata Adler's '*Speedboat*' (2013) where the author disrupts the chronological order of presenting its events by adding scene-scrapes, flashbacks, prophetic flash-forwards and thought splinters, creating rifts and distortions in the timeline of narration. Although these mind snippets are seemingly random and haphazardly placed, they evoke something peculiar and honest about human thoughts and how the mind works. Some of these works are similar to James Joyce's '*Ulysses*' highlighting the stream of consciousness in how they narrate.

Very often, human minds gather thoughts in order to tell a story and even whilst telling the story (narrating) they drift a little to smells, images, and flashbacks, etc. which are running through their heads at the moment of narration. Modern and Postmodern writers employ the stream of consciousness in their writings to depict that very same phenomena. In *Dear Esther*, the stream of consciousness of the narrator is observable. Each audio clip can be considered as a separate thought and rarely two audio clips form a single idea, adding the randomness of how they are selected to be heard, makes the identification of the plot rather impossible.

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With each play through, there is a different combination of what, when and where the narrator says something and with each player interacting in the story there is a different interpretation of what the actual story and plot are. Hence as a player, there is more work to be done away from the screen as he has to analyse different pieces of a puzzling storyline creating an intense sense of agency in ‘moulding’ the story, where he serves as a “bricoleur” assembling the various randomised fragments of the story.

Non-linear narration is limited when it comes to the novel genre, because despite the novel’s successful tradition in telling stories that have persisted for ages, it cannot contain an algorithm and the mechanics to disrupt the timeline of a story same as a videogame. In a novel, the events are already placed, although seemingly random, once read they would always exist in a fixed sequence. In a videogame, however, the events could be shuffled as many times as the player replays the game. In one playthrough in *Dear Esther* the player might hear this audio clip:

“When you were born, your mother told me, a hush fell over the delivery room. A great red birthmark covered the left side of your face. No one knew what to say, so you cried to fill the vacuum. I always admired you for that; that you cried to fill whatever vacuum you found. I began to manufacture vacuums, just to enable you to deploy your talent. The birthmark faded by the time you were six, and had gone completely by the time we met, but your fascination with the empty, and its cure, remained” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

And then this afterwards:

“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

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just for this: to keep any would-be rescuers at bay. The infection is not simply of the flesh” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

This illustrates one of the calculations of the game to generate one fragment audio clip after the other. It could be the reverse and with each audio clip and playthrough the chances of hearing the same chronological order lessen. This technique is used in the game specifically to mimic human memory and better portray how the narrator recalls his trauma.

Uncharted 2, despite being a videogame that employs nonlinear narration, still does not allow the player to change or affect the structure of the plot in any form. The player starts with the hero in the aftermath of an accident but is then pulled back in time and reaches that accident only after several hours of gameplay. This is proof that nonlinear narration is not always used to give the player agency over the plot. In this case it is used for dramatic effect only.

The reason behind using nonlinear narration in *Dear Esther* is to highlight how the human mind recalls traumatic events; the player will get the opportunity to experience how our minds process a traumatic event; the hazy memories, the flashbacks and the chaotic recalls as well as the time distortion are all part in how the human mind deals with traumatic memories.

The fact that the game developers intended for these game to be narrated by altering the monologues with each playthrough is grounds for wanting to place the player in the correct mind-set (namely the narrator’s) and wanting the player to identify with the narrator; going through every step he takes in exploring the island and in filtering all of his scabbled thoughts as well as to allow the player to have an agency in the process of meaning-making. Thus every review or recount of the story of *Dear Esther* is a mere personal interpretation of the game’s story, created and narrated by the player himself.

Other videogames such as *Bio Shock: Infinite* use this technique to move across multiverses and create an illusion of being in control of what is happening to the protagonist although the player would walk Booker Dewitt (the protagonist) to his

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certain death at the end, knowingly. This technique is used to show that the protagonist (Booker Dewitt) is the antagonist (The prophet Comstock) only in the future, creating a circle of recurring actions with no ending and no beginning; always one event causing another in a perfect loop.

However, the narration of *BioShock: Infinite* is recounted by a reliable narrator, and namely the protagonist Booker Dewitt, hence we can trust every event that happens. Unlike *BioShock: Infinite*, *Dear Esther*'s narrator is neither clearly distinguished nor fully trusted.

2.3.3.2. The Unreliable Narrator

First Coined by the literary critic Wayne Booth in the early 1960's, the 'unreliable narrator' is one of the most powerful tools of fiction writers especially those of mystery and crime since it allows them to paint a character as a terrible person just by the fact of recounting a misguided version of a story. "In unreliable narrator the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions... and so we hold the narrator suspect" (Chatman, 1978, p. 233). Hence the account that is understood by the reader lies in opposition and contrast to that of the narrator. Thus, the narrator is an unreliable source of information.

According to Chatman and Seymour B, there are six reasons of an unreliable narrator in any narrative structure, which are:

"Cupidity (Jason Compson) cretinism (Benjy) gullibility (Dowell, the narrator of the Good Soldier), psychological and moral obtuseness (Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle"), perplexity and lack of information (Marlow in Lord Jim), innocence (Huck Finn)...including some baffling mixtures" (Chatman, 1978, p. 233).

If one of such causes is found in a narrator in a given narrative construct, he is by default recounting untruthful accounts and is therefore unreliable.

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This technique is usually used in postmodern novels to question the reliability of the narrative itself. For postmodernists, the personal conflicts of each individual color how they see actions and events and therefore each individual recounts the same events differently. In postmodern novels, even the narrator cannot be trusted because even he might have his own colored thoughts of how the events happened. This puts pressure on the reader (player, if it's a videogame text) to discern and decide his/her own version of what is true and what is not within the context of the story.

In the game of *Dear Esther*, the narrator does not explicitly identify himself, nor is it expressed in the story that he is a side character, the protagonist, Esther's lover or killer or even the island itself. The narrator seems to have intertwining identities, for at first level of narration he narrates the events using 'I' in such instances: "I could stumble blind across these rocks, the edges of these precipices, without fear of missing my step and plummeting down to sea." (The Chinese Room, 2012) to create a distance between him and the other characters, yet he also seems to be perplexed if those characters are part of himself or not: "I find myself increasingly unable to find that point where the hermit ends and Paul and I begin" (The Chinese Room, 2012). This implies that the narrator suffers a personality split and is therefore unreliable.

Since the game contains a historical book which is written by the character Donnelly, and since Donnelly was sick and suffering from syphilis, the first narrator accuses the second narrator of unreliability: "If the subject matter is obscure, the writer's literary style is even more so, it is not the text of a stable or trustworthy reporter." (The Chinese Room, 2012). So the narrator of the first level accuses the narrator of the second level of unreliability. He also refers to Donnelly as being insane: "at this point, Donnelly was going insane as syphilis tore through his system." therefore accusing himself of being so, since Donnelly is part of the narrator himself.

In the first level of narration the narrator (if he is the protagonist) does not take action in his own story, he merely describes his state and he narrates what happened to him and his beloved through the characters he created (second level of narration) due to his psychological illness (split personality) or fever hallucinations or even the

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medication effects, hence, their stories are his and the narrator's identity changes throughout the progression of the game. Gerard Genette divided these levels or layers of narration into extradiegetic for a narrator that stands outside the story and intradiegetic for the narrator being part of the story (Genette, 2007, p.357).

In some parts, the narrator is intradiegetic as well as autodiegetic, for he tells his own story in the first person's point of view: "I have dredged these waters for the bones of the hermit, for the traces of Donnelly, for any sign of Jakobson's flock, for the empty bottle that would incriminate him." (The Chinese Room, 2012) He talks about himself looking for the bones of the hermit and the remains of Donnelly; these are all his actions, making him an autodiegetic and intradiegetic narrator.

In other parts of the game, the narrator seems to narrate other characters' stories (the hermit, Esther, Donnelly and Paul) from the third person point of view:

"Blind with panic, deaf with the roar of the caged traffic, heart stopped on the road to Damascus, Paul, sat at the roadside hunched up like a gull, like a bloody gull. As useless and as doomed as a syphilitic cartographer, a dying goatherd, an infected leg, a kidney stone blocking the traffic bound for Sandford and Exeter. He was not drunk Esther, he was not drunk at all; all his roads and his tunnels and his paths led inevitably to this moment of impact. This is not a recorded natural condition: he should not be sat there with his chemicals and his circuit diagrams, he should not be sat there at all" (The Chinese Room, 2012).

In this case the narrator is telling what happened to Paul and Esther. He is not part of it but rather stands outside of it; hence he is a heterodiegetic and extradiegetic narrator.

Another aspect of the narrator that could be drawn is that the narrator does not know what is going on around him: "The gulls do not land here anymore; I've noticed that this year they seem to have shunned this place. Perhaps it's the depletion of the fishing stock driving them away. Perhaps it's me." (The Chinese Room, 2012). The fact that he does not know whether the seagulls have stopped landing on the island

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either by him or because of the toll of time is proof that he is not omniscient and he is as lost as the player.

However, what seems to be certain is that he is psychologically unstable likely suffering from post-traumatic disassociation. To boot, he took some medication rendering his mind lucid causing his delirium “I swallow fistfuls of painkillers to stay lucid. In my delirium...” (The Chinese Room, 2012) and it is clear that a person that has taken painkillers would not be relied on to recount a story.

Another passage in the game highlights the delusional state of the narrator when at the beginning he talks of Esther and Donnelly as being two separate characters and then at the end as one person: “We will send a letter to Esther Donnelly and demand her answer.” (The Chinese Room, 2012) The existence of identifiable contradictions in the story told by the narrator and knowledge about his state while telling the story clearly demonstrate that he intended to be unreliable which leads to the player’s knowledge of the world to be challenged and thus to mistrust everything that the narrator recounted up to that point.

2.4. *Dear Esther*’s Discourse Analysis

Videogames are a new medium and to conduct a proper discourse analysis there needs to be proper tools with which to be analysed. To study what is beyond text (videogame), it needs to be dissected and analysed using literary theory to extract the intertwining relationships between videogame texts and novel texts and on a larger scale, videogames and literature. If videogames can be analysed on the basis of metafiction, magic realism and literariness which are of a major importance to a number of literary masterpieces, then these additions are a strong addition which push for these non-written texts to be considered as part of literature.

2.4.1. Intertextuality

Very often the saying: “there is nothing new under the sun” suggests that human creation, however innovative it might be, does not spring from nothing. Even the most

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extraordinary oeuvres and creative masterpieces are but a reconstitution of preceding works.

In writing, a text is connected to numerous previous texts which had an impact on the author. On this matter Roland Barthes says that: “a text is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (1977, p. 146). Therefore, a text is a patchwork of multiple texts. However, spotting such relationships between texts might be tricky and depends on the reader’s background and readings. This phenomenon is what Julia Kristeva terms as Intertextuality.

When considering Videogame texts, intertextuality finds no exception in the medium; on the contrary, the artefact is known to reference other forms of art, especially pop art, which is also the case for *Dear Esther*. The game with its literary inclination makes several allusions to other texts.

For instance, there are many instances in which the narrator alludes to biblical references. In one of the passages the narrator says: “We are not like Lot’s wife, you and I; we feel no particular need to turn back” (The Chinese Room, 2012). This is a reference to the bible; the story of Lot and his wife in the Book of Genesis, chapter 9 and how she was turned into a pillar salt upon looking back.

The graphic environment of the game also plays an immense role in highlighting the Intertextuality of this game, as there are a number of books and bibles that are placed in the game. There are also many verses of the bible on cliffs and on the cave walls.

One particular verse is found in one of the cliffs in the last chapter that refers to the dialogue of Paul the Apostle:

“And as he journeyed, it came to pass that he drew nigh unto Damascus: and suddenly there shone round about him a light out of heaven: and he fell upon the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him,

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Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: but rise, and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.” (Acts 9:3-9)

This would also suggest that the name Paul of the game is a reference to Paul the Apostle.



Figure 6: Damascus and other bible references written in fluorescent paint on the island.

The name of the city Damascus is also recurrent throughout the game. The narrator refers to it multiple times: “I made my own little pilgrimage. My Damascus a small semi-detached on the outskirts of Wolverhampton” (The Chinese Room, 2012). This refers to the bible story of Saul who became Paul after having his sight restored on his journey to Damascus. In the caves this line is written on a wall "Behold, Damascus is taken" (The Chinese Room, 2012) which is also a quote from the bible; from Isaiah 17:1

However, other means of highlighting Intertextuality are used in videogames.

In some videogames, the player would achieve a high score or simply do a specific action in a specific time and place would cause the game to prompt a pun

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about another videogame or make a cut scene of a parody of a movie or even of a real life person. This action is referred to as the ‘Easter Egg’ in the gaming community.

In *Grand Theft Auto: V* the player gets a throwback in time where he sees four familiar faces racing on simple bikes in an area named Grove Street. The scene has no direct relationship with the plot of the game and might appear nonsensical. Although to a player who has played *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (which is a preceding release of *Grand Theft Auto: V*) those four faces are known since they are the main characters of that game, hence that scene was a connection between the two games.

A similar example of this can be drawn from *Risen 3: Titan Lords*. As the player navigates his way in the game he finds a character named unknown in a very distant place that requires some effort getting to. A simple interaction with the character and he would claim to be you in a previous story; meaning the player’s character in a different story. For those who have played the previous game *Risen 2: Dark Waters* the unknown character is actually the main character of that game. Although he has no relationship to the first game, the developers decided to include him as an ‘Easter Egg’. By doing so they further expanded the reach and boundaries of the game.

The conscious use of intertextuality as a narrative device which makes the reader aware of the existence of a relation to other texts, can also be part of a bigger image and purpose. When a text is loaded with intertextual references, it emphasizes its aspect of fictionality and exceeds fiction to become a metafiction.

2.4.2. Metafiction

As it has been mentioned in the first chapter of this research, Metafiction is the reader’s awareness of the texts being a mere creation which the author constantly reminds the reader of. Postmodernists use it to keep the reader always pondering on what he is actually reading.

To highlight this feature a number of techniques are employed such as: “creating biographies of imaginary writers; presenting and discussing fictional works of an

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imaginary character” (Orlowski, 1996, para. 10) as well as breaking the fourth wall (self-reflexive text). All of these techniques have been experimented with across all mediums of narration by postmodern artists.

In the postmodern view, videogames have always been metafictional and selfreflexive. Phrases like ‘game over’ and ‘press button x to proceed’ have almost always existed in videogames to call for the player’s participation or to remind him that this is a simulation and not real life. All these interactive phrases make the game aware that it is a mere creation, namely a game.

The Stanley Parable is a game that features this very same technique. The narrator of the game would often address the character Stanley and remind him that he is infact in a game that he created. He would also address the player that he is a narrator and even tell Stanley that there is a player controlling him achieving what is refered to in cinema studies as the fourth wall breaking. At some point, the player reaches a chamber that has the whole script of the game to which the narrator panics and restarts the game for having been unmasked. In *The Stanley Parable* the game is refered to as selfreflexive because it is aware that it is a game.

The game *Grand Theft Auto: V* contains parodies of real life sitcoms, tv and radio talk shows and even movies. As the game contains TVs and radios, the player may watch a TV show called “Shame or Fame” which is a parody of the real life *American Idol* TV show. While driving the player may also listen to a variety of songs of real life singer and parodied radio talk shows criticising the government, social obligations and all kinds of topics in a humerous manner. This mimicry of life cannot be achieved through any other medium but videogames.

Intertextuality being a criterion to consider a text as metafictional, *Dear Esther* is intertextualized with other works as mentioned in the previous title and not only that but finding fiction within fiction is very common. In the game, the narrator not only quotes a fictional writer (Donnelly) who wrote a book about the island he is on:

“I quote directly: “A motley lot with little to recommend them. I have now spent three days in their company that is, I fear, enough for

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any man not born amongst them. Despite their tedious inclination to quote scripture, they seem to me the most godforsaken of all the inhabitants of the outer isles. Indeed, in this case, the very gravity of that term – forsaken by god – seems to find its very apex.” It appears to me that Donnelly too found those who wander this shoreline to be adrift from any chance of redemption. Did he include himself in that, I wonder?” (The Chinese Room, 2012)

But he also discusses the narrator’s authenticity, literary style and trustworthiness:

“Donnelly’s book had not been taken out from the library since 1974. I decided it would never be missed as I slipped it under my coat and avoided the librarian’s gaze on the way out. If the subject matter is obscure, the writer’s literary style is even more so, it is not the text of a stable or trustworthy reporter” (The Chinese Room, 2012).

The narrator seems to be criticising the in-game book and its author although he himself is a character of a story. This open criticism from one layer of fiction onto another tremendously expands the boundaries of that manufactured reality. The passage can also be interpreted to be referring to the actual narrator of the main story himself, as he is also not “stable or trustworthy reporter” (The Chinese Room, 2012) he makes a comment that could just as equally reflect the obscure literary style of the main text (Game).

2.4.3. Magic Realism

Magic realism is a literary trend that started by the beginning of the twentieth century in parallel to postmodernism. It came as a rejection of the rational description of reality and the juxtaposition of unreal elements into the fictional world. Magic realism is particular in the way it makes the supernatural elements seem as part of everyday life. L.L Duncan states that: “The magic element of magical realism is received in a plain, pragmatic manner by the characters in the tales and not as

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something special or a ‘power’... It is simply part of their version of what otherwise would be recognizably our ‘reality’.” (2015, p. 3)

Videogame developers of the studio Giant Sparrow best explored this concept in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. The game is a first person narrative where the player takes the role of Edith in exploring the rooms of her family members by being transported into their minds and seeing through their own eyes their last moments before dying. The game also features the player taking the form of some animals such as a dog, a bird, a cat and an octopus. Noticeably these fantasy elements are illogical by the player’s standards of his reality, yet still normal by the standards of the characters’ reality.

Dear Esther also mixes the mundane and the supernatural in what seems to be logical in the narrator’s sense of reality. All of the islands items could be considered an aspect of magic realism since a completely abandoned island cannot contain paper boats that float in caves and on the seashore. Neither would there be any lit candles, painted symbols of diagrams and chemical substances and personal shrines of the narrator’s wife, Esther, across the entire island.

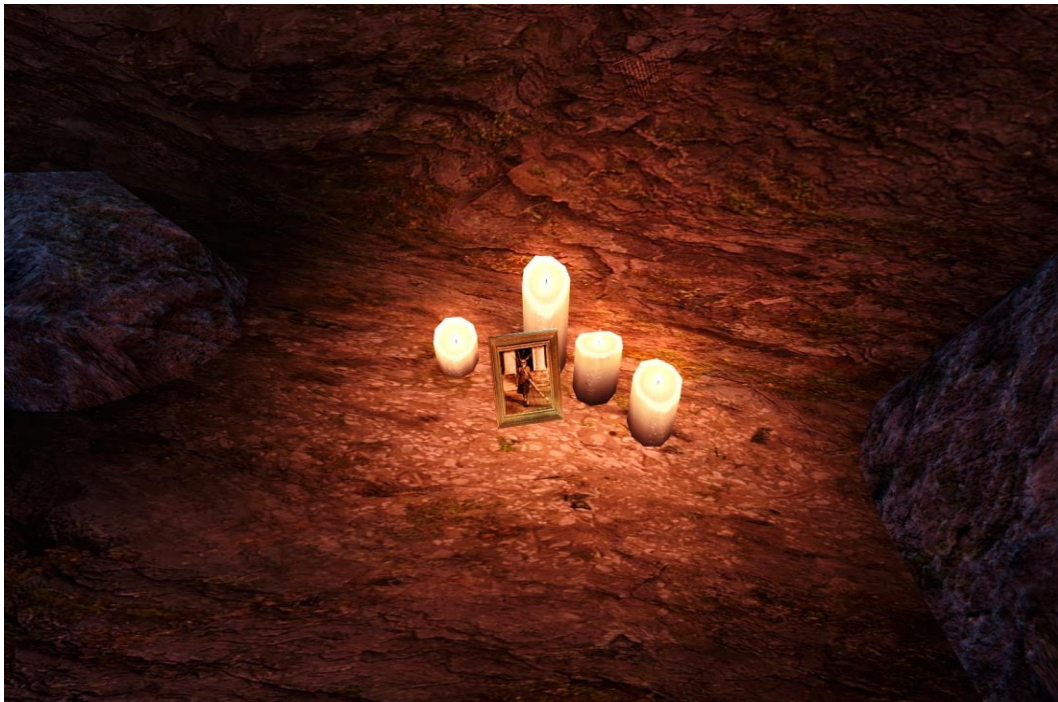


Figure 7: One of the common shrines found in the island.

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Whether these items and shrines are linked to the wife of the narrator or not is not made clear in the game. Therefore, these items could be totally unrelated to the story and added simply to fill the empty spaces and add to the confusion.

The game also includes some undistinguishable ghostly figures that appear here and there yet they seem to be a mundane part of the island to the point that the narrator does not even mention them. As Raymond Federman puts it: “In those spaces where there is nothing to write, the fiction writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, diagrams, charts, designs, pieces of other discourses, etc.) totally unrelated to the story.” (Federman, 1975, p. 12)

The use of religious iconography is also amply used in some magic realistic works either to deconstruct religion or to add a sense of mystery. As L.L Duncan states: “The language of religion allows magical realist writers to infuse a sense of wonder and mystery into the narrative” (2015, p. 1) or to express the ineffable: “Thus the ‘realities’ depicted in magical realist texts are a physicalization of the ineffable, those emotions and circumstances which are unutterable, especially modern, rationally based language.” (Duncan, 2015, p. 4)

In *Dear Esther*, the developers made use of religious iconography to express that which cannot be expressed (namely what the narrator is going through) by a “modern and rationally based language” (Duncan, 2015, p. 4). In the game, there are a number of cliffs and cave walls painted with white biblical quotes which appear completely unnatural to the island’s realistic structure yet their placement expresses what even the narrator could not express; they express his unconscious escape to religion as he faces grief, guilt and love-loss.

In the last part of the game and as the narrator throws himself to die, he turns into a flying creature with a noticeable shadow of a bird on the ground. To the player it is awe filling and extremely incomprehensible. Yet the narrator is not even surprised or startled that he metamorphosed into a flying bird making it seem as part of the game’s logicity.

2.4.4. Literariness

One of the major and persistent arguments in Literary studies is whether a given text could be considered literature or not. To distinguish a work to be part of literature it had to possess some characteristics that other deemed literary works already possess. This is referred to as literariness.

Miall and Kuiken define literariness as: “when stylistic or narrative variations strikingly defamiliarize conventionally understood referents and prompt reinterpretive transformations of a conventional concept or feeling.” (1999, p. 2) To Miall and Kuiken, all three constituents (form, stylistic variation and the reader’s response to them) otherwise the text is not considered as part of literature.

Postmodernism however, shakes all trusted grounds of what a text is and what a canon is. Postmodern critics argue that there are no standard characteristics by which to define what is literary and what is not.

Nevertheless, works of artistic merit in literature often have some characteristics in common. John Oldcastle argues in comparison to ordinary writing that literariness or literary writing: “[...], having creative and artistic intent, is more carefully structured and uses words for the rhetorical effect of their flow, their sound, and their emotive and descriptive qualities.” (Oldcastle, 2000) The use of language therefore, appears to be of great importance in distinguishing between an artistic piece of writing and an everyday plain account of the world.

2.4.4.1. Style and Language

Language is a commonly disregarded aspect in videogames, despite being vital, developers often overlook it in favour of gameplay. However, creative writers are becoming an important part of the industry and it is reflected in the quality of storytelling language in the recently commercialised games, which is the case of most narrative games, and particularly *Dear Esther*.

Game script writers in *Dear Esther* have put an enormous effort in the style and structure of the game’s language. The refined arrangement and the cherry-picking of

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words and their structure convey a high emotional charge of every sentence uttered by the narrator.

The style employed in the writing of *Dear Esther* completely defamiliarises the reader-player from the language, it is often described to have a “novelistic” feel to it, so much so as to challenge stories and language forms used in books.

Rich with adjectives and adverbs, and uncommonly phrased sentences, the style is very experimental, and brings to mind an experimental poem.

“We shall begin to assemble our own version of the north shore. We will scrawl in dead languages and electrical diagrams and hide them away for future theologians to muse and mumble over. We will send a letter to Esther Donnelly and demand her answer. We will mix the paint with ashes and tarmac and the glow from our infections. We paint a moon over the Sandford junction and blue lights falling like stars along the hard shoulder.” (The Chinese Room, 2012)

Language is one of the most memorable and well thought-out aspects in the game; it is highly poetic and contains a lot of symbolism and figures of speech, especially from what is expected of a videogame.

2.4.4.2. Figures of Speech

In terms of symbolic images and figures of speech, the game of *Dear Esther* is dense with similes, metaphors, hyperboles and personifications as well as religious symbols. Each passage contains at least one figure of speech.

The following passage showcases this: “Dear Esther. I have found myself to be as featureless as this ocean, as shallow and unoccupied as this bay, a listless wreck without identification.” (The Chinese Room, 2012) Through this passage, the writer conveys, the narrator’s feelings of grief and being lost through a simile.

Metaphors are also heavily used to air out his ideas of sickness and death. In this passage he expresses his suicidal thoughts in a most elegant manner: “I will

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abandon this body and take to the air.” (The Chinese Room, 2012) As if he will leave his body and take a spirit form to free himself from his suffering.

The writer also uses a lot of personifications where he attributes human traits to inanimate objects. The island is rendered a living being through many passages. An example of this: “The caves that score out the belly of this island, leaving it famished” (The Chinese Room, 2012) As if the island is a person with a stomach and can feel hunger.

Legion of religious symbols are also interwoven with the narrator’s style. Several times, there is a mentioning of Paul and Damascus symbolising the journey of Paul the Apostle to Damascus and how he was resurrected; the mentioning of the event of Lot’s wife and how she turns to salt upon looking back as a symbol of regret.

The game’s environment also features lots of shrines with lit candles and mementos of Esther and the accident all hinting at a loss of someone close to death and religion.

The amount of figures of speech and religious symbolism in the game are not simply scattered in the passages or in the game’s environment but they are constructed to portray an accurate and appropriately emotional description of the themes that the game deals with.

2.4.4.3. Themes

All praised literary works encompass a number of themes that deal with the complexities of life. Works of world renowned authors deconstruct such themes and turn them into comprehensible ideas.

In *Dear Esther*, much of the themes that can be extracted deal with the emotions from the dark side of the spectrum, subjects that are not easy to tackle and which videogames are stereotyped to stir away from. In fact, the game is commercialized as a “first-person game about love, loss, guilt and redemption.” (The Chinese Room, 2012)

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At its core, the game centers around grief and guilt. The narrator often hints that the whole island is born out of his grief for his beloved. In his final monologue he mentions: “From this island, flight. From this grief, love” (The Chinese Room, 2012) this points out that grief and guilt are eating their way through him as is hinted at numerous times.

Love as a theme is very much prevailing in the videogame. The narrator is recounting his tragic story of losing love. The way he addresses and recalls his beloved’s memories can only be from a stand point of someone who loves her. The amount of careful details he goes to in writing the letters, recalling their memories, their home, and how her loss has driven him mad are all proof of love. Hence love as a theme is wrapped in layers of depression, sickness and mourning.

Since the story of the videogame turns around a man mourning the death of his wife leading to his own death, the diction of death and sickness spring out as the player hears the narrator’s voice. But the way the game tackles such a theme cannot go unnoticed, such delicate subject is not devoid of its humanistic and emotional significance, on the contrary, the writers create an emotionally charged atmosphere in every aspect of the game to convey the feeling of loss, and the passing over to the other side.

The videogame also includes other themes such as solitude and isolation, and even addiction. The narrator often accuses Donnelly of being both sick and addicted to alcohol. Donnelly himself recounts a story of a hermit seeking solitude. While the island’s main feature is isolation. The story goes as far as to explore subjects like faith, apparent in the frequent use of bible quotes and religious scripture and allusions in various layers and parts of the game.

Dear Esther, however, is not an exception in the gaming world, to have dealt with such themes. The genre of Narrative Gamer or more conventionally the Serious Games category has an established trend of dealing with serious issues far from what is expected and usual in the gaming community, the less “fun” topics are becoming more and more present in the more recent games. One of the most successful titles is

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the award-winning *What Remains of Edith Finch*, unexpected winner of Best Game in the BAFTA Game Awards for 2017, an unprecedented for a narrative game. The videogame was highly praised for its story and narrative technique for which it won Best Narrative in The Game Awards in the same year of its release. The story itself is that of the Finches, whose members die from a supposed curse. The player progresses through the game by experiencing each of the Finches' deaths in their respective perspectives. Besides its literary properties, the game deals with the theme of Death in an unusual playful way, with the motto being "life goes on", it gives each deceased family member its rightful mourning and homage viewing their last moments through their eyes and in their heads. Another central theme is that of Family and superstition.

When any of these themes is relayed, videogames do not only do so through the words of the narrator. Other aspects of the game such as the music, the narrator's voice and the environment in general, hint that the island reeks of death and solitude as well as grief and sickness.

2.5. Immersion

Often, it is not enough for a story to be well written or conveyed; with a suspenseful plot, heroic characters and a fantastically described world. Other aspects contribute to completely slip the reader into a state of immersion into the fictional manufactured reality.

In a novel or any written piece, words are the only tools available for the author to put the reader inside his story. In videogames, however, the potential to immerse the player into the story is limitless due to the tools that it provides for the developers (author).

In any good story the consumer needs to find something he can engage in, to be hooked to it. Because videogames are an interactive audiovisual medium, they reach for mostly all of the human senses (except smell). The more the medium engages the player's senses the more he is hooked to the story and therefore he feels as part of the

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game, and ultimately as part of the story the author created. Novels do not provide this type of experience.

In videogames even a narrator's voice would play a crucial part in telling the story. In a novel, no matter how skilled the author is, and how he would infuse the character's dialogue with sad diction for example to relay a sad part of a story, it does convey emotions to their full extent. In a videogame, the audio dimension of the medium adds the tone and voice of the narrator which would be sufficient for the player to realize whether this part is sad or happy.

In *Dear Esther*, just through the narrator's melancholic voice and tone at the beginning of the game, the player realizes that this is going to be a sad story. Through his voice again, the player can even guess the narrator's (character's) age. In a novel, if it is not explicitly stated, the reader would never know.

Transmitting a dark or cynic atmosphere; an emotion or even a theme of horror or a love scene to the reader, is simply limited in the novel. In a videogame however, even the music conveys part of the story.

2.5.1. Sounds and Soundtracks

Stories are not transmitted only through words. Music, even without distinguishable words, conveys an emotion or a feeling as it is referred to as the wallpaper of the mind.

Music or soundtracks as they are referred to in videogames, play a crucial role in the creation of a story in a videogame. Soundtracks are composed to fit a certain and specific part in the story.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* each aspect of the game has a particular soundtrack to it. When the player fights, meditates, explores a forest, goes to a city or even if he is checking his inventory, the soundtracks are always present; combined with the environment to create a specific atmosphere. As the environment of the player-character changes so does the soundtrack. Soundtracks however, are not all that there is to music.

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Videogame's environments always contain sounds that go along with the environment; the sound of a river, the sea waves, the rustling of the trees, the cold winter air, and the background noises of animals in a dark forest. All of these sounds affect the auditory sense of the player which in its turn affects his experience of the in-game's world. This aspect of videogames as a medium is something impossible for the novel to provide.

As videogame developer Pinchbeck (2012) confirms “Music is so important to games, it bypasses the head and hits straight in the heart. If you want to get an emotional reaction from a player, focus on your music [...] having immersive emotional depth to the music makes a big difference” in telling the story. Indeed, while creating *Dear Esther*, sound was given a particularly important focus, it complements the storytelling and serves in creating the perfect haunting atmosphere intended. Each scenery in the island and its corresponding audio fragment is accompanied by a particular track, ranging from mostly piano solos in the beginning to foster a disturbing and slightly scary feeling to the use of violin for a more sentimental and emotional effect, a representation and intensification of the sense of grief and guilt that the narrator tries to convey in his passionate and increasing madness which the music seems to heightens and match at the same time.

Score composer, who is also co-founder of The Chinese Room, Jessica Curry, does an impeccable job in creating tracks that complement the story bits as well as make for a unique experience that promises to linger on in the mind of the player and earn critical acclaim. Designer and lead artist Briscoe praises the composer's work saying: “She's done some amazing things with the music to help portray the atmosphere and emotions throughout the journey across the island. I don't think I've ever seen music establish such a symbiotic relationship with the environment and story before, so for me it's really ground-breaking stuff.” He continues to assert that “the music is no longer just a backdrop, but an integral part of the storytelling process” (Briscoe & Pinchbeck, 2012). In fact, Curry wins several awards and

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nominations for the game score namely Best Audio at the TIGA³'s and GANG⁴'s, and even at the BAFTAs in 2013. (Curry, 2018)

Ambient sounds and soundtracks serve an important role in highlighting themes, atmospheres, narrator and story tone as well as feelings that prevail in a story. But music in general goes hand in hand with the graphics of the game, a well exploited combination of both makes for an effective addition in conveying stories through the videogame as an audiovisual storytelling medium.

2.5.2. Graphics

One of the most attractive aspects of videogames is the over-the-top efforts that developers attribute to the graphic design of the game world and the careful arrangement of each and every detail in it that makes its allure in the gaming community. Developers would often spend hours arranging a room or a cave or a house with every possible detail to paint as much of a picture of the place as they have in mind, realistically.

In written arts, on the other hand, the author is limited in this sense because as much as a good writer the author is; he/she cannot paint a perfect picture with every detail of a place without drifting away from the narration of the story. Videogames however, offer an alternative.

In the novel, the act of describing and the act of narrating are two separate phenomena. As the author starts to describe a place or a character, time stops and with it the narration of the story. In videogames, much like real life, time does not stop and neither does the act of narration, since the description lies in the graphics of the world that is already perceived, heard and interacted with.

The graphics offer much more than a continuation of the narration process; they also provide the visualization of previously unknown creations.

³ The Independent Game Developers' Association

⁴ Game Audio Network Guild



Figure 8: The moonlit island creates an unparalleled atmosphere.

Traditionally, an author would spend a fair amount of time to describe a creature he out fashioned in his novel. The real image of that creature would always be inside the author's imagination and unless he relies on the readers' imagination to picture it, his creative creation would never be seen the way it is meant to be.

In videogames, the developers do not have to rely on the players' imagination to picture an unknown creature for example. They can simply *make* the creature in the virtual world with all details. They do not have to describe it to the player; they can simply *show* it to him. The same goes for fantasy worlds or places that the player has not had the chance to see.

In *Dear Esther* the developers emphasized on every detail of the island, since those details carry much of the narration of the story; every landscape and every nook and cranny in the game is related to the story. The landscape features several elements that are essential to interpreting the story and can shape it to extremely variant degrees. Various objects are thrown around the island from car engine parts to shopping carts to photographs, things that wouldn't normally feature in an isolated desolate island that has no sign of technology, no roads and no shops. But missing any of the items would alter the understanding of the story, for example, if the player

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does not encounter –or notice- the prenatal ultrasound images, they may never realise that Esther was pregnant and the narrator was to be a parent making his grief worse and making more sense to the player.



Figure 9: Detailed dreamlike caves in Dear Esther.

Graphics allow for game world building that makes the videogame fit for exploration in the true sense of the word, not just of world environment but of the story itself. This aspect gives the videogame is “replayability”, a factor that can be compared to re-readability in books which always counts for the quality of the work. However, compared to the written word, the reader rarely misses reading certain paragraph and the author can only hope to be write a story ambiguous and stimulating enough to have the reader come back to it.

Realising the importance of graphics, The Chinese Room had, for the remake of its Landmark edition of the videogame, paired up with Environment Artist Robert Briscoe to recreate the scenery and give the players a game world worthy of the story it was telling. (Denby, 2011) The graphics of the game got equal critical acclaim to the audio and won several awards and nominations including Excellence in Visual Arts, Best Visual Art and a BAFTA nomination for Artistic Achievement.

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In fact, game developer Pinchbeck himself praises Briscoe's work on the environment; "the way it really subtly and cleverly feeds into the game, reinforcing the story and experience. It's such a challenge to create a world that really feels alive, not just a pretty backdrop, and that's an achievement" (Briscoe & Pinchbeck, 2012).

The gorgeous vistas in the game are not simply described but rather 'painted' in a virtual world because of the impact they have on the story. Hence, a painting may express a thousand words, an audio-visual interactive painting, however, could express ultimately and extensively much more.

2.5.3. Interactivity: The Added Dimension

Although interactivity is not 'to touch' in its literal form, it does allow the player to interfere in the world, into the story itself at some point.

The most important aspect of a videogame must be the aspect of interactivity, compared to all other storytelling media, especially the novel and the film. Videogames offer the player the chance to be an active agent in the story making. Videogames in general are the only medium that provides a wide range of what the player can do to the world, the characters, and the story. Although most critics would argue that even the player's interaction in the game is foreseen and planned by the author of the game, videogames are the only medium that allows the player to customize the *hero* as well as make split-second moral decisions that would affect both story and player.

Some videogames offer the choice to the player to pick the gender, the race, the faction and even the attribution of strengths and weaknesses. In *Dragon Age*, for instance, the player decides on the faction which is a warrior, a thief or a mage; the gender as well as a full customization of the facial features of the character and his/her strengths and weaknesses.

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* the player not only gets to customize the character to his liking, he also gets to choose the cloths and garments and the deity

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he worships. This type of interaction with the fictional world not only immerses the player into the story but it gives the illusion that he is taking part in building the story.

In recent videogames, the player has to make decisions that not only change the storyline but it would also put his morality into play. In a climactic scene of the game *Mass Effect 3* the player has to make a split second decision on which race should be saved from the attack. This decision not only lies heavily on the character's conscience after it is done, but would also make the player feel responsible for it. This quality of feeling transmission through an action-consequence paradigm can only be provided in a medium that offers interactivity.

Similarly, one of the most debated endings in the videogame world in the past years is that of the narrative episodic game *Life Is Strange* where all player choices and actions have effects on the outcome of the story. In one of the episodes, the player-character, Max, makes a series of actions that would determine whether her friend commits suicide or not. At the end of the final episode, following an apocalyptic storm, the player, having developed an emotional link with the town the story is set in and its inhabitants, is made to choose between sacrificing Arcadia Bay (the town) or the protagonist's best friend and love interest, Chloe, whom she had gone to great extent to save all along the game. This highlights player agency in creating the story and deciding for its outcome and the moral choices he is faced with.

The game of *Dear Esther* is the exception of recent videogames when it comes to interactivity. The developers intentionally limited all aspects of interaction in the world and kept it to a bare minimum. The intention behind this was to showcase that videogames even if stripped from the aspect of the usual interactions and decision-makings that they provide; they are still technological mediums of storytelling, by excellence, and how they can and will certainly be competitors with other media in terms of narrative, despite the accusations of its immaturity and heavily relying on other forms of storytelling, which could be considered enriching rather than weakening.

2.6. Conclusion

Through the application of various literary theories concerning the novel genre, in this chapter, the videogame *Dear Esther* as well as some other narrative games, have been subjected to analysis and were found to encompass not only aspects of the novel genre but also provide additional dimensions which are a few evolutionary steps ahead of the novel as a storytelling medium without discarding its tradition but taking from it to create even better stories to a different kind of audience. This extended tradition manifested in literary aspects is proof of the videogame being simply another form into which literature has grown to be following the technological advancement of the age. Thus, videogames can be regarded as an experimental form of digital literature which should no longer be stigmatised as a childish escapist source of entertainment but rather as a postmodern, audio-visual and interactive medium of storytelling.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Videogames have always been stigmatised as only a violent inducing means of entertainment which prevented them from being properly examined in terms other than their negative behavioural effects. In the past two decades, the infant, yet rapidly growing videogame industry challenged these views by incorporating complex narratives into games leading to the rise of a new genre, what can be termed the *narrative videogame*, that puts more focus on stories rather than gameplay. This shift renewed scholarly interest of different backgrounds in the medium to explore what this virtual interactive audio-visual instrument can achieve in terms of storytelling.

The videogame scene is fast changing making research to quickly become irrelevant, preventing any final conclusions to be drawn about the current state of the medium, but not eliminating the possibility of evaluating the potential of the art and what it is yet to become by looking into its present characteristics and how it chooses to employ them. This research's aim was to compare two seemingly different arts and draw them closer in terms of narrative and literariness, specifically the narrative videogame and the novel genre as two narrative fiction media.

Literature is the vessel for human experience, while it is primarily written, it also includes other forms, from oral to performed. The most prominent genre of literature is unarguably the novel. Literary scholars identify a handful of aspects that makes the work of fiction, mainly plot, characters and setting, both temporal and special. The novel form has undergone many changes since its inception, especially during the modern and postmodern era where authors rejected all established pillars, among which those of fiction writing. The postmodern novel, in particular, witnessed a range of experiments on its basic elements with the introduction of techniques like the stream of consciousness, the unreliable narrator and a distortion of plot linearity. Fragmentation characterised every layer of narration and Intertextuality, Magic Realism, and Metafiction became the catchwords of the era that persisted till now; as common fiction writing devices.

Stories in videogames have had minor focus in the design scheme as they were regarded as simply context-setters for the most important aspect, play. However, developers started experimenting with the medium by including elaborate story

elements that found ground within the gaming community. This led to more experimental videogames that completely shifted the balance of design in favour of stories, sometimes even at the expense of gameplay. This led to the emergence of a new genre, the narrative videogame, alternatively labelled exploration game, story-driven game, or art game. The narrative properties of videogames have been subject to intense debate that drew favourable attention towards the medium. The nature of the videogame and how it should be studied is disputed among scholars to fall either on the side of narrative or play, known as the ludology vs narratology debate. The latter is the employed methodology in this research as the videogame is examined essentially for its storytelling function and regarded as a form of text in the postmodern sense.

The exploration narrative videogame *Dear Esther* is chosen as a primary example to illustrate the narrative and literary elements found in videogames. Unlike what is expected of a videogame narrative, *Dear Esther* writers challenge every conception of what it should be by experimenting with its basic elements and importing several purely literary devices into the game that could be considered postmodern.

While analysing the game, recognised aspects of the novel, particularly the postmodern one, were identified. The game has a hard-to-assemble story to say the least, as it was the developers' intention to experiment with meaning-making and experience-creating in videogame through a story told in both the game world and words, rather than gameplay and other ludic elements. Plot, as a consequence, is a fragmented incomplete unit due to the narration being non-linear and, unlike the novel, the nonlinearity is taken a step further by making the story fragments randomly generated through the game mechanics, still within a more or less linear path. The character identification was just as tricky due to the narration being in first person with an unreliable narrator who confuses himself with the rest of the people in the game, with none of them, including himself and the player-character making a physical appearance. The setting in the videogame is established both through the narration and the visual elements of the game world, however, it can be inferred from

the narrator's words that nothing is real and everything actually happens inside his mind with the island, as the main motif of the story and focal graphic setting, a mere manifestation of a delusional dying man's mind. This subjects the story, as a whole, to a myriad of subjective interpretations with each being a valid one.

Further than that, videogames were shown to be integrating literary techniques like intertextuality and metafiction, as illustrated in *Dear Esther*, but not exclusive to it. Such techniques usually ascribed to great literary works can be used in videogames to create layers of fiction and to extend the world of one particular fictional story to make dialogic connections to other works across a multitude of genres and forms. Magic realism is another trend that found better use in videogames rather than in the novel as videogames allow the player-reader to witness the ineffable magical elements unfold rather than having the author explain them through words.

What is perhaps uncommon in videogames is the emphasis on language, as it usually stops at simplistic every day speech. Narrative games, however, resemble novels in yet another aspect that is not always easy to upgrade due player expectations and the medium's ludic nature, which is language. *Dear Esther*, in particular, proves that it is possible to experiment with high language forms and still find appeal and appreciation among the gaming community. Its language is highly poetic and emotionally charged. It is loaded with figures of speech from metaphors and similes, to personifications and hyperboles. The sophisticated diction helps frame a clear picture of the delicate themes of death, grief, guilt and love that dominate the game's narrative. *Dear Esther's* story, language and themes stand defiantly against circulated stereotypes about what videogames are about, what stories they tell and how they do so and inspire a fresh and deeper look into the similarities it has to literature.

Videogames, while possessing all aspects of the postmodern novel, successfully combined literary narrative elements with what makes the medium different: its audio-visual interactive nature. These qualities make them a step more advanced in storytelling than the novel allowing their creators to stimulate the reader-player's mind and imagination in more ways than is possible through written words only. Sound effects, music and realistic graphics are crucial for player immersion into

the fictional world. Interactivity, on the other hand is the videogame's most highly regarded feature but is underestimated when it comes to its effect in relaying a story. Never has the novel given the reader the chance to personalize the protagonist and decide on his race, faction, gender nor facial and body features; never before was the player pushed to make split-second moral decisions that can alter the whole direction of the plot. These player-driven decisions can only be found in videogames and not only do they give the player agency over the story but they also absorb him into its fibre.

Through the application of various interdisciplinary literary theories on *Dear Esther* and other similar narrative videogames in this research, it can be deduced that videogames have similar literary aspects that a novel possesses and offer a limitless potential as postmodern narrative media. Videogames can therefore be considered as a technological upgrade or enhancement of the novel genre. Thus narrative videogames have the potential to be part of literature.

This research has focused only on a particular genre of videogames, that is the narrative one, as it is the most resembling to literature, and the one the industry is taking a direction towards as the gaming community is diversifying. The purpose was to highlight the potential of videogames as a storytelling medium which would surely manifest in the years to come and would call for a more in-depth updated research.

Finally, it is perhaps time to rethink what literature is in light of this modern technological era. As it has been shown, videogames may just be the next best medium for telling engaging and enduring stories that fit this participatory age.

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