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Can you play a story?
What are Walking
Simulators and how do they
immerse us?

by
Heidi A. Colthup

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in Linguistics
Division of Arts and Humanities, University of Kent

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I began the doctoral programme in September 2012 and throughout this

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work carried out under normal terms of supervision.

Abstract

This thesis sets out to define the genre of Walking Simulators within a domain located between videogames and literary texts and investigate how they immerse participants.

Existing scholarship into the relatively recent discipline of digital humanities and video games tends to fall into the narrow boundaries of game studies (*ludology*) or narratology. In 2014 Astrid Ensslin published *Literary Gaming* (2014) in which she sets out the problematic nature of video game study. Ensslin argues that video games are a ‘hybrid’ text that can be plotted on a cline from literary through to ludic, thus reinforcing the divide between academic approaches and schools of thought - literary analysis and narratology on one side, opposing game studies and ludology on the other. These two approaches, in attempting to understand and explain how and why players and developers have turned the video game industry into a billion-dollar industry worldwide, according to Ensslin tend to focus upon ‘the study of *storyworlds* and the techniques of in-game storytelling’ (Ensslin 2014: 5). In recognising this divide and seeking to find a method of ‘fusing’ these two approaches, Ensslin has created an analytical framework that maps ‘a distinctive body of such hybrid texts

along a literary-ludic spectrum' (2014: 5), and her cline stops at 'Quasi-Literary Games' (2014: 45).

This thesis seeks to extend the use of Astrid Ensslin's analytical framework beyond her 'Quasi-Literary Games' and firmly into a more commercial and widely-known sub-set of video games called Walking Simulators.

This thesis analyses three commercially available Walking Simulators: *Dear Esther* (Pinchbeck and Morgan 2012), *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016), and *The Novelist* (Orthogonal Games 2013), and examines participant responses found on the Steam gaming platform public forums. By taking approaches drawn from cognitive poetics, usually reserved for literary texts, this thesis sets out to confirm the location of Walking Simulators in the lacuna between the domains of videogames and literary texts by identifying how participants report their experiences.

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Chapter 1 - Thesis Overview

1.1 Introduction

There are 32.4 million people in the UK that play video games (Newzoo 2017), or approximately 49% of the UK population, and an industry that was worth £5.7 billion in 2019 (BBC 2019). Compare this to 2019 research on reading which suggests that 51% of the UK read a book in the previous year (Cooke 2019), and that the UK publishing industry is worth £6 billion in 2019 (Rowe 2019). Videogames as a form of entertainment, immersion and escapism are as popular as reading books. This alone would suggest that they are worthy of examination and study.

This thesis argues that a new digital storytelling genre has emerged in the form of so-called 'Walking Simulators' (originally a pejorative term coined by gamers to describe the fact that they just involved 'walking about' and little action, but which will be re-purposed in this thesis). Walking Simulators have some of the defining features of games as theorised and modelled by Ludologists, but also foreground a strong and immersive narrative arc (as defined and modelled by narratology). Walking

Simulators, a relatively new form of digital entertainment, have attracted surprisingly little by way of academic scholarship to date. ‘Surprising’, because, as this thesis will argue, they are rapidly emerging as a novel, sophisticated and engaging form of digital storytelling, and indeed display many features that we might consider symptomatic of ‘literariness’, or literary reading: a foregrounded and complex narrative (as mentioned), sophisticated types of immersion, re-reading and re-interpreting, and schema refreshment. We will set out to find support for this claim through close examination of the reported experience of players via various online gamer forums.

This chapter sets out an overview of the thesis and includes justification for this project, details of the research questions and broader objectives. This chapter also includes an outline of the organisation of the thesis, setting out the underpinning theoretical frameworks that have been utilised within each chapter.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis asks the question: can Walking Simulators be legitimately regarded as games, or are they better seen as literary artefacts, even a new

form of literary text?

This thesis argues that Walking Simulators occupy a liminal space between literary text and games, the latter offering what we will define as 'ludic' experiences, the former, 'literary'. Walking Simulators exhibit both literary and ludic features and are what Ensslin describes as a 'hybrid subgroup' that offer both readerly and gamerly experiences for participants (2014: 1), and as such throughout this thesis those participants are also referred to as player-readers to reflect and encapsulate this hybridity. These experiences are activated in participants due to the nature of the immersion Walking Simulators give rise to, which is akin to the experience of literary reading, rather than the more 'mechanical' types of immersion experienced by the player of video games. These distinctions will be returned to in more detail subsequently.

This thesis locates itself within a liminal space between game studies and literary studies: ludo-stylistics. This term, coined by Ensslin (2014: 53), is central to the establishment of this liminal, cross-fertilised space between game and story, where newer digital storytelling artefacts offer elements of both genre. Ensslin's ludostylistics sets out a framework for establishing the spectrum upon which literary and ludic artefacts can be situated and it is by using elements of this framework that Walking Simulators can be

positioned and analysed This thesis sets out to establish three main areas: the identification of fundamental and defining elements of the Walking Simulator, the particular nature of immersion experienced by player-readers of Walking Simulators, and finally to examine the experiences of player-readers of Walking Simulators as reported publicly within the Steam gaming platform's forums.

1.3 Justification for this thesis

Videogames have expanded from an experience that attempts to mimic sports and board games to multimodal ones that can provide immersive stories where the audience can lose themselves within an imaginary alternative world, just as a reader can do when reading a literary text. Walking Simulators, we will argue, fall squarely into this latter category, providing just such an immersive experience of an imaginary world (often, as will be seen, quite limited in size and scope).

While this aim of proving literary credentials for a new genre of videogame is a worthwhile scholarly project in its own right, there remain good reasons why this research could prove useful to the industries of gaming and publishing. By providing a clear link between the new

videogame genre of Walking Simulators and print literary fiction, possible new markets for videogames could open up. I will return to these implications of the work within the conclusion. So, it is hoped that the conclusions of this thesis will have important implications for practice and implementation.

Increasingly, we are seeing the impact of the digital revolution upon methods of storytelling. Speculative and fantasy fiction has become more popular (Rowe 2018) with greater implementation of transmedial forms of storytelling; in other words, stories told across media platforms and not simply retold in a different format (audio book compared to printed text, for example) are increasing in popularity and relevance, with different elements appearing in different media (multimodality). The ways we now experience stories has extended beyond the spoken word, books, films, and television. Recent television and film titles such as *Black Mirror's Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018) episode shows, are becoming more game-like. Briefly, the *Bandersnatch* episode features a branching narrative that viewers are able to interact with by pressing a button on their TV controller (providing they are watching with an active internet connection to their television). This allows viewers the apparent agency to choose the outcome of the story and thus introduced ludic (game-like) elements to a

mainstream television show in the UK. It is possible to allow the choices to be made automatically which therefore does not exclude those without the necessary internet connections. Increasingly 'on demand' television is using this selection method in simple ways to allow viewers to personalise the adverts they are presented with during short breaks in shows; this is not to change the outcome of the advertisements themselves but rather to offer the appearance of control over their viewing. Of course there is no escape from the adverts on commercial streaming websites but one can tailor the viewing experience to personal preferences somewhat, albeit with a simple binary choice of ad. The selection of advertisements is not a ludic experience, but it does offer the appearance of agency, which is a necessary element of games, as we will see in chapter 3.

Against this shifting cultural background offering increasing personalisation, this thesis sets out to establish how one new genre of digital storytelling is offering an experience more familiar to readers of fiction rather than players of games.

The effects of the digital revolution in storytelling modes upon literary studies can be seen in the creation of digital fiction which is now well established as a research field, with early articles on the effects of technology and Postmodernism appearing from the 1980s onwards,

(Porush (1980), Niesz and Holland (1984), Delany and Landow (1994), Bolter (1991), McDaid (1994), and so on) but perhaps most importantly Espen Aarseth's book *Cybertext* (Aarseth 1997). Aarseth introduced the notion of 'ergodic' literature where the reader must do some 'nontrivial effort' (1997: 1) to access, process and engage with the narrative. This thesis will also draw upon this field of digital fiction for elements of categorisation of Walking Simulators (alongside the aforementioned notions of differing types of attention offered by print texts in analogue form and these onscreen digital texts).

Game studies (ludology) has continued to grow and develop in parallel with the videogame industry, yet it still draws upon the fundamentals of games established in 1938 by Johan Huizinga, and subsequently, in the light of the digital revolution and rapid expansion of the games industry, scholars have further developed his ideas: Caillois (1961 trans.), Eskelinen (2001), Wolf (2001), Frasca (2001), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Juul (2003), Pearce (2004), Jenkins (2005), Kirby (2011).

How different media engage us has long been a shared field of research within psychology, literary studies, and game studies. In chapter 4 we will turn to how narratology and cognitive poetics have examined the 'limits of realism' within literature, (Fludernik 1994: 445) and how the reader is

immersed by text upon a page (either analogue or digital): Fludernik (2009), Murray (1997), Stockwell (2005, 2019), Thon (2008), Tal-Or and Cohen (2010), Ensslin (2012), Ryan (2013), Bell et al. (2018). Game developers often regard immersion as something of a holy grail for gameplay experience: Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), Ruggill (2009), Hebert (2013), Mason (2013), Keogh (2014), Knoll (2015). We will examine how immersion operates within games in chapter 3, and then in chapter 4 we will turn to how it features in the reading of literary texts. Identifying different orders of immersion will in turn allow us to further locate the domain of Walking Simulators and whether they are truly videogames or digital literary texts. The appearance of a new type of storytelling artefact that exhibits both elements of videogames and literature offers an intriguing development for digital humanities more broadly.

The digital revolution and democratisation of mass media through the internet also offers new possibilities for virtual 'eavesdropping' upon the ideas and experiences of those participants in this new genre of Walking Simulators. Online public forums offer a novel source of available data but also present inherent difficulties of studying a new discourse form which a number of researchers have addressed: Mackenzie (2017), Holtz et al. (2012), Im and Chee (2006, 2012), Marra et al. (2004), Seale et al. (2010),

Smedley and Coulson (2018). The Steam gaming platform, which is where the case study data has been collected from has previously been accessed for data by researchers mainly situated within computing and game studies: Joseph (2017, 2018), Lin et al (2018, 2019), Soroko et al. (2019). Thus, this thesis examines a new area of publicly reported digital experiences of immersion within the humanities.

As will be seen in the following overview of relevant scholarship, this thesis draws upon theories and models from literary and game studies (ludology), where they intersect, and suggests where opportunities for further convergence may be found.

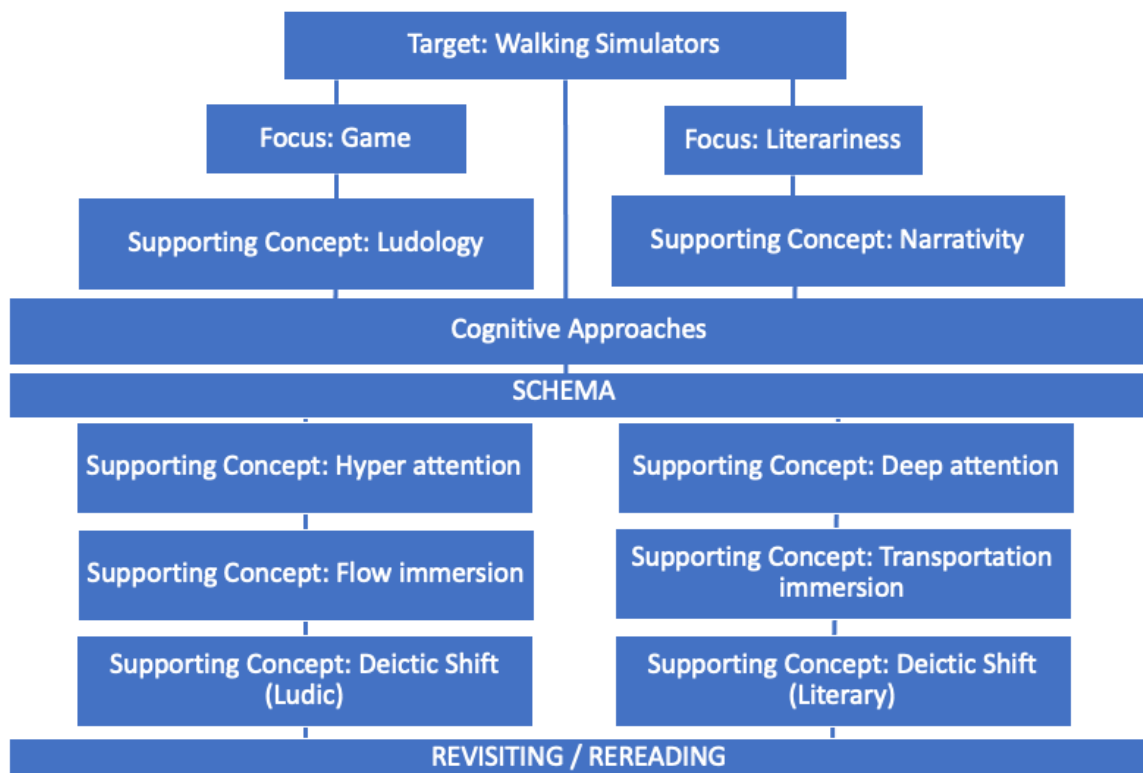


Figure 1: Theoretical Map

The theoretical map above sets out, in brief outline, the route this thesis will take. The first area of focus is the concept of *game* and its area of study, *ludology*. The parallel concept to game is *literariness*, those aspects commonly found in literary texts, and the attendant area of *narratology*. Setting out the necessary aspects of these two domains will afford an initial location of the Walking Simulator: in short is it a game or a literary text? The cognitive approaches outlined will allow a further, more detailed, delineation and suggest key elements that might be identified in reader/player comments found on the Steam forums that will provide evidence to verify and test the claims of researchers.

1.4 Research Objectives

This thesis sets out to categorise the new genre of videogames, Walking Simulators, within an interdisciplinary field and thus has the following objectives:

- The identification of Walking Simulator titles
- The examination of these titles for elements of videogames
- The examination of these titles for elements of digital literature
- Determining the immersion type of Walking Simulators

- Testing the resulting immersion hypothesis of Walking Simulators against the reported experiences of anonymous participants

It is useful here to identify the titles referred to as Walking Simulators, when they were released, and the name of their developer company. We will return to how these were selected in chapter five, the Methodology, but providing a list of titles here will at least provide some identification of this form.

Walking Simulator List

2008 *The Graveyard* - Tale of Tales

2009 *The Path* - Tale of Tales

2012 *Dear Esther* - The Chinese Room

2013 *Bientôt l'été* - Tale of Tales

2013 *Gone Home* - The Fullbright Company

2013 *The Stanley Parable* - Galactic Cafe

2013 *The Novelist* - Orthogonal Games

2014 *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* - The Astronauts

2015 *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* - The Chinese Room

2015 *The Beginner's Guide* - Galactic Cafe

2016 *Firewatch* - Campo Santo

2016 *That Dragon, Cancer* - Numinous Games

2016 *Virginia* - 505 Games

2017 *What Remains of Edith Finch* - Giant Sparrow

It is worth noting here that there are only 14 titles which are referred to throughout this thesis, others are often included in the categorisation of Walking Simulator (*Proteus*, *Thirty Flights of Loving*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, *Passage*, *Journey*, and others), but as will become clear in chapter five, these titles have not been included for a variety of reasons. The Steam PC gaming platform in August 2020 had 71 titles listed as Walking Simulators which illustrates the growing interest among the game-playing public.

1.5 A Contentious Name

In August 2013 designer Steve Gaynor working with developers Fullbright brought out a 'story exploration video game' (The Fullbright Company

2013) called *Gone Home*. This title has subsequently been termed a Walking Simulator and ‘the most important game of the decade’ (Carpenter 2019). *Gone Home*, in part, also escalated a growing campaign amongst some male videogame fans, or ‘hardcore gamers’, to attempt to define videogames as a heterosexual male space designed by men, for men, and focusing upon action and violence. This campaign was called Gamergate and involved online attacks on women working as developers and critics within the videogame world. It began with a focus upon the interactive text adventure *Depression Quest* (2013) developed by Zoë Quinn, but for a detailed account of the main points and those involved Chris Suellentrop’s 2014 article in the New York Times¹ sums up Gamergate. For the purposes of this thesis, it is only necessary to briefly examine how the name, Walking Simulator, was arrived at and its ongoing contentious nature.

The name ‘Walking Simulator’ is recorded by the Urban Dictionary for the first time in April 2014, and the Gamergate controversy began in August of that same year.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/opinion/sunday/the-disheartening-gamergate-campaign.html> [Accessed 01/08/2020]

2



walking simulator

A video game genre that originated in [DayZ](#), a [Arma 2](#) mod, where one for the main portion of the game traverses the [huge game](#) world without doing much else. The term has since come to define a broader genre of games where the walking is a big part of the experience.

"Dude, have you [played DayZ](#) yet? It's maybe the best walking simulator [out there!](#)"

[#walking sim](#) [#walking simulation](#) [#walk sim](#) [#walking simulation](#) [#dayz](#) [#pedometer simulator](#)

by **Ghost Tartar** April 17, 2014

Figure 2: Urban Dictionary screenshot (Ghost Tartar 2014)

The central purpose for calling these exploratory narrative games ‘Walking Simulators’ was to deride those who created, experienced, or wrote about them because, as Suellentrop points out, ‘the game designers, journalists and critics who, among other alleged sins, desire to see more (and more realistic) representations of women and minorities’ (Suellentrop 2014). Walking Simulators offer a shift in the cultural paradigm of videogames from the combative origins of sport and competition to a wider digital entertainment form that allows for exploration of all types. While not wishing to get mired in discussion about culture wars and Gamergate, it is important to flag up the ongoing contention around the name of these digital storytelling artefacts, so let

us return to that.

The Walking Simulator, criticised in the Gamergate controversy for not being a 'proper' game because they lack the conventional challenges offered by mainstream popular videogames, which in turn presents considerable challenge to the cultural hegemony of the First-Person Shooter (FPS) type game. As we will see over the course of this thesis, Walking Simulators employ a similar first-person viewpoint of FPS games, and often have a similarly rich visual environment, but as McGovney points out, 'they have almost no action at all and ... mostly focus on the atmosphere and story'(2016). In short, for McGovney and many gamers who privilege action over narrative, these titles are a waste of time and money.

Video games are a culturally dominant form of entertainment (Fest 2016: 2), and as such mainstream media has devoted considerable attention to them. Journalists have been discussing Walking Simulators for less than twelve years, academia (specifically using the term 'Walking Simulator'), for less than six years. Until 2014 titles now called Walking Simulators were categorised by games critics writing for mainstream media outlets using a variety of different terms, and have continued to be called different things: 'first-person exploratory games ' (Sliva 2013),

'Justwalkingism' (Barda 2014), 'Environmental Puzzle Games', 'First-Person Feels' (Mackey 2015), 'narrative games', 'empathy games' (Campbell 2016), 'Interactive Narrative Experience', (Kill Screen Staff 2016) as a representative sample. Naming this new form as 'Walking Simulator' is now broadly accepted as a convenient term as it fulfils their most basic definition (Rignall 2017). Academic scholars have called them 'art games' (Rughiniş and Toma 2015), 'Walkers' (Muscat et al. 2016), 'Freeform Unstructured Narrative', and 'audio-visual novel', (Heron and Belford 2015), or they avoid using any term beyond 'videogame' or 'digital literature'.

Interestingly, despite the early intended insult, developers, critics, and audience alike have adopted the name of Walking Simulator.

This is a genre that attracts criticism because there is no action, challenge or contest and 'hardcore' gamers tend to suffer a mismatch between their expectations of a videogame. When faced with a title appearing on a traditional gaming platform such as PlayStation, Xbox, or Steam the anticipated experience does not fit the reality of the Walking Simulator genre which does not provide opportunities to showcase kinetic prowess or skill-based operations requiring strong hand-eye co-ordination where violence and death are often foregrounded. For these types of players, the

term 'Walking Simulator' is an insult.

Grabarczyk says that the name 'Walking Simulator' is inadequate and misleading as the titles that fall into this category offer more than just walking and are also not true simulations. By adopting this less than useful name of Walking Simulators, Grabarczyk suggests, this negative aspect that has arisen in the shadow of Gamergate is normalised within academic discourse (2016: 242); however, in the light of no better accepted term, he, like other scholars and critics, have settled upon using the name because it is popular and recognised. This is still a contested area, and as recently as March 2019 on Twitter videogame and transmedia writer, Andrew Walsh called for the renaming of Walking Simulators to 'Narrative Exploration Game'.



Figure 3: Twitter screenshot (Walsh 2019)

As the image shows, this elicited 70 replies directly to this tweet, but the final total was far more with various nested threads attached to other users' retweet of this message. Neither creators nor audience of Walking

Simulators have yet settled on a name universally agreed upon. This lack of established terminology may be because there is not yet a clear definition of this new form, but it may also be that the Walking Simulator or Narrative Exploration game is merely a transitional point in digital storytelling, but we can only speculate on this. It is hoped that this thesis will play its own part in settling this question and defining the genre properly.

1.6 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into ten chapters and is structured as described within figure 3 below. Chapter two is a brief overview of the history of the videogame identifying its early history and where contemporary games and digital literature find their antecedents. This will allow us to contextualise the common technological mediality of videogames and digital literature and thus situate Walking Simulators between the domains of game and literary texts.

Chapter three examines ludology, the study of games and videogames in

particular. We will establish the fundamentals of a game and this will allow us to locate those gamery, or ludic elements that feature in Walking Simulators. In this chapter we will also examine Ensslin's ludostylistics framework that can be applied to *literary games*, which may provide a useful method of examining Walking Simulators. In this chapter we will also turn to cognitive approaches that apply to videogames as this may aid classification of Walking Simulators by identification of the types of cognitive engagement they activate in participants. In other words, what feedback from players provides evidence that they are deeply immersed in a game?

Chapter four is an examination of those shared aspects of literary texts that we might usefully interrogate in Walking Simulators to identify their literariness. Narrativity in terms of structure and point of view will be addressed as these are common elements in traditional videogames. We will also turn to cognitive approaches commonly used in literary stylistics and cognitive poetics that can help further classification of Walking Simulators as artefacts and identify further cognitive engagement in participants. In short, how are Walking Simulators storytelling artefacts?

Chapter five is an outline of the methodology used to identify possible Walking Simulator titles, and then how data was sourced from the Steam

gaming platform public forums which might provide evidence of Walking Simulators domain location and the immersive effects experienced by participants that confirm this location.

Chapter six begins the application of those identified elements drawn from ludology and literariness that can be applied to the data set of selected Walking Simulator titles. At this point we will have criteria drawn from chapters three and four by which to judge Walking Simulators to situate them as either videogames or digital literary artefacts.

Chapters six, seven, and eight are case studies taking the Walking Simulator titles *Dear Esther*, *Firewatch*, and *The Novelist*, respectively and examining their forum data according to the methodology. In other words, the previous chapter will have identified each title as game or literary artefact, but are these classifications supported by participant reporting in the forums?

Chapter ten returns to the thesis statement, research questions and objectives and draws conclusions based upon the data discussed within the case studies. This chapter identifies limitations of this study and makes suggestions for future studies as well as possible commercial

opportunities.

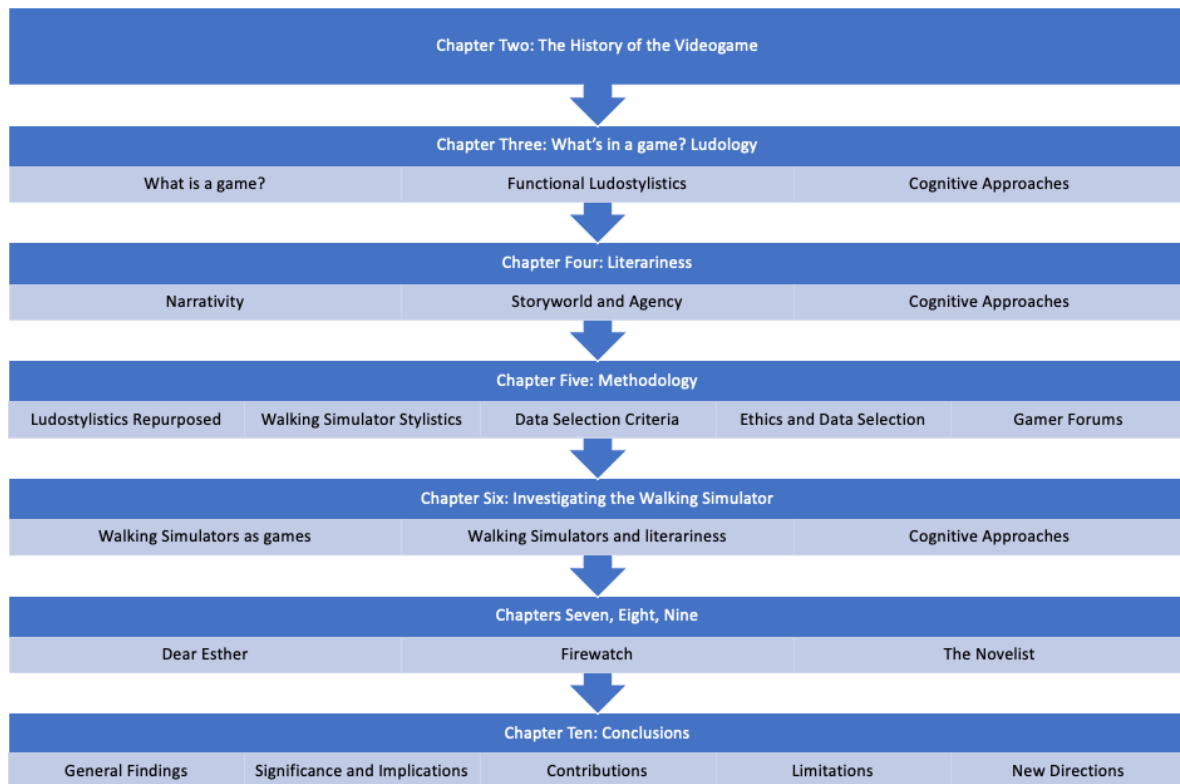


Figure 3: Chapter organisation

Chapter 2 The History of the Videogame

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides some background and context for the Walking Simulator by following its development from the earliest days of computer gaming adventure stories through to the multimodal storytelling experiences being offered now by independent developers. This brief history offers some explanation for the categorisation of Walking Simulators as videogames because of their historical development. This chapter also provides some background on hypertext literature as it has a common early history with videogames as they are both digital computer artefacts. Including hypertext literature at this point within the thesis, alongside a history of the videogame also allows something of a 'scene setting' for the forthcoming chapters as they follow the two domains of game and literature.

2.2 The History of the Videogame

With any new cultural development there were precursors, early ancestors, and even now related forms that we might term digital ‘cousins’ to the Walking Simulator. The Walking Simulator did not arrive fully formed when the first examples, about a decade ago, began to appear. Walking Simulators have a shared history with digital fiction as they both arise out of the earliest experimentation in computer games. Their shared first ancestor is the *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976) which offers a text adventure that the player controls through various commands by typing words such as “go east”, “take lamp”, and so on, evidencing what both Aarseth and Wolf point to as being crucial for an ergodic text or videogame - the player must physically act to experience more (Aarseth 1997: 1), (Wolf 2001: 13).

```
.run adven

WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!!  WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

yes

SOMEWHERE NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND FORTUNES IN
TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUMORED THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER
SEEN AGAIN.  MAGIC IS SAID TO WORK IN THE CAVE.  I WILL BE YOUR EYES
AND HANDS.  DIRECT ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS.  I SHOULD WARN
YOU THAT I LOOK AT ONLY THE FIRST FIVE LETTERS OF EACH WORD, SO YOU'LL
HAVE TO ENTER "NORTHEAST" AS "NE" TO DISTINGUISH IT FROM "NORTH".
(SHOULD YOU GET STUCK, TYPE "HELP" FOR SOME GENERAL HINTS.  FOR INFOR-
MATION ON HOW TO END YOUR ADVENTURE, ETC., TYPE "INFO".)

- - -

THIS PROGRAM WAS ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED BY WILLIE CROWTHER.  MOST OF THE
FEATURES OF THE CURRENT PROGRAM WERE ADDED BY DON WOODS (DON @ SU-AI).
CONTACT DON IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, ETC.

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK BUILDING.
AROUND YOU IS A FOREST.  A SMALL STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND
DOWN A GULLY.

east

YOU ARE INSIDE A BUILDING, A WELL HOUSE FOR A LARGE SPRING.

THERE ARE SOME KEYS ON THE GROUND HERE.

THERE IS A SHINY BRASS LAMP NEARBY.

THERE IS FOOD HERE.
```

Figure 4: Colossal Cave Adventure (Crowther 1976)

These early text games can be problematic for participants - until familiar with the conventions of this type of game, the player has no idea what *words* will elicit another portion of text. The ‘nontrivial effort’ (Aarseth 1997: 13) for Wolf with videogames are both evident here as typing in a string of symbols - a word or phrase - will then reward the player with more of the story. A cybertext demands that the reader stop and make a decision of some sort, to choose which direction to take, or some other choice of action and then either click the chosen text onscreen or type in a response. We cease to be readers passively taking in or observing the story, and instead become active participants or players making decisions

which appear to have an effect upon the outcome of the story; however, in the case of text adventures the novice player will not know the successful words which lead to the desired outcome. This is a common problem with text adventures because the coding that underlies the game has a finite list of words that can be used at each point in the game; the player is not generally aware of these words in advance and may often use synonyms that do not result in success. For example, early text-based games used a fairly narrow choice of verbs/actions, *Zork 1* (Personal Software 1980), has a limited lexicon that the player had to discover for themselves through trial and error. The player cannot even begin to participate in the game or enjoy the narrative until they have overcome the problem of *how to play it*. Fortunately, with the arrival of the Internet it is now possible to play text-based games again without requiring the original hardware via emulators, and helpfully, various websites now also provide advice for players, such as lists of usable commands:

INVENTORY - gives you a list of items you have
LOOK - describes your surroundings
TIME - how long you've been playing
N - Moves you north (use **S**, **E**, etc. for other directions)
DIAGNOSE - tells you about your injuries

Figure 5: Text adventure instructions (Fisher 2016)

If the player/reader inputs 'search' for example, rather than 'look' then the response would often be that the game did not know what 'search' meant. The demands placed upon the player are often too much for all but the most tenacious. Rather than entirely preventing the development of games featuring text commands, this rule of often limited vocabulary forced developers to create other methods to provide players with some form of agency and enable them to navigate the gameworld without the frustrations of earlier iterations, and thus, the 'point and click' adventure game was created.

It is at this point that text adventures evolve into two different genres: adventure games that rely upon the player interacting with the screen events by using some form of controller (mouse, joystick, PS or Xbox controller, and so on) in place of the direct action of typing words on a keyboard that will elicit some response in the case of text adventure games (Wolf's videogames). The other genre is hypertext and these, closer to 'traditional' literature in that they are much more heavily centred upon text, require the reader create the story in their imagination - Aarseth's ergodic cybertext.³ Digital fiction, hypertext, cybertext, electronic

³ It is important to note here that I use the terms 'cybertext', and 'hypertext' to be broadly synonymous, Espen Aarseth carefully defines each (Aarseth, 1997: 75), but as this thesis is concerned with Walking Simulators it is of lesser concern.

literature, or interactive fiction, is a genre best known to academics. Early, and well-known examples of this form are Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: A Story* (Eastgate Systems 1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (Eastgate Systems 1995). The canon of hypertext was confirmed by Astrid Ensslin in her 2007 book, *Canonizing Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions* (2007) who suggests that hypertext is 'the digital poetic form' (2007: 3) and calls for new dynamic methods of understanding reading and writing within an ever changing new media and technology background . This genre continues and is championed by the Electronic Literature Organisation which holds an annual conference that features recent developments, publications, and scholarly research on the form⁴.

It is also here that another division can be seen; the adventure video game has a visual element of images, a *gameworld* created where the player has agency, or control, over the landscape they see - they can choose (to some extent) where they will move, what they will click on, and they have the illusion of being in control of how the adventure unfolds. This agency is illusory, as we will see, because of the boundaried nature of video games,⁵ and often players will be prevented from accessing parts of the gameworld

⁴ In 2019 the ELO conference held in Cork, Eire, included a panel of conference papers on Walking Simulators.

⁵ The one exception to this is the procedurally generated open world game like *Elite: Dangerous* (Frontier Developments, 2014) or *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games, 2016) which extend as players explore further into the created universe.

until they have satisfied elements of the gameplay embedded into the coding (essentially conditional 'if, then' statements). It is only by interacting with the gameworld, the visual environment presented onscreen, that the player can advance the story, and this is controlled by how the gameworld has been written in its machine coding which is less like rules found in real world games that can be broken, instead the syntax of the software code sets out the procedures that cannot be easily overridden unless altered⁶.

Hypertext fiction, unlike the adventure video game, has no (or very minimal)⁷ visual landscape onscreen for the reader, no *gameworld*, instead, like reading a literary text, they must create a *storyworld* within their imagination and thus each reader will rely upon their personal schemas to imagine the described landscape, reliant upon only the words provided by the author. The gameworld is the visual rendering onscreen of the developer's concept of the 'field of activity' (Ryan 2015: 63) in which the player interacts with the game itself, in other words, it is what we see and where our onscreen avatar appears and can be controlled.

Videogames rely upon the electronic equipment of a computer, and the

⁶ That alteration would be in the form of 'hacks', or software viruses that may be malicious. Often the original developers insert 'backdoor' codes that override the original procedures for their own ease of access to different parts of the game.

⁷ There may be images included as illustrations and as such these will be still photographs, or more likely, line drawings.

coding language which results in the onscreen gameworld and its rules. In the related medium of film this is expressed as the setting, but videogames demand that participants (the players) perform a physical act to further the narrative or action onscreen within the gameworld, unlike film which requires a physically passive audience. The storyworld, Ryan explains as: ‘the semantic domain projected by the literary text is a non-actual possible world or an alternative possible world’ (1991: 554), in other words, the very words, sentences, paragraphs and so on produce a world in our imagination as we read the text and this world is not the real world. Writing or telling stories sets up an imaginary space shared between the creator and audience where an alternative world is created. The player of the adventure video game is presented with a landscape that has been described by machine coding and thus appears with visual elements that are processed within the brain. The reader of the hypertext or cybertext will instead participate by ‘seeing’ the landscape within their mind’s-eye (the textual input cues up a personal conceptualisation of the storyworld), but like the video game player this is still reliant upon the author’s words (bottom-up linguistic input), or developer’s coding.

Figure 3 below, shows the split after 1976 when *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther, 1976) was published. The top line of titles shows those that

evolved along the text route; this has evolved into hypertext and digital fiction. The lower line of titles included images and via ‘point and click’ adventure games have become action-adventure games.



Figure 6: Text Adventure descendants

Colossal Cave Adventure offers a storyworld with no gameworld; there is a virtual space shared between author and reader created within their imaginations, but no onscreen space created by developer with moving avatar controlled by player. *Zork*⁸ (Personal Software 1980) likewise offers a storyworld and is considered Interactive Fiction rather than a game, unlike *Colossal Cave Adventure* which is available from Microsoft⁹ where they describe it as ‘the game that started it all’ (Microsoft, 2020). The following two titles, *Afternoon: A Story* (Joyce 1987) and *Patchwork Girl* (Jackson 1995) are regarded as major titles within the canon of literary hypertexts (Aarseth 1997: 13, Ensslin 2014: 46) and study of these is situated squarely within the literary domain. *Hard West Turn* (Montfort

⁸ It is possible to still read this title on a Text Adventure website - http://textadventures.co.uk/games/view/5zyoqrsugeopel3ffhz_vq/zork [Accessed 21/12/2016]

⁹ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/p/colossal-cave-adventure/9wzdnrcrdlv4h?activetab=pivot:overviewtab> [Accessed 10/12/2020]

2018) is experimental electronic literature created from computer code which generates and regenerates a novel each year. The titles on the lower line are all considered games because they have a recognisable outcome of winning or losing; they present some form of challenge in their puzzles that must be solved for the game to continue. *The Hobbit* (Melbourne House 1982) offers a storyworld, but additionally is mediated multimodally and thus has images that aid the reader/player's creation of an imagined space by providing visual description which is a proto-gameworld; like many other early videogames (this one developed for the ZX Spectrum) the title is now available to play online¹⁰. This title, in common with text adventure stories like *Colossal Cave Adventure* demanded the participant use the correct term when inputting a desired move, but *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasarts 1990) offered the first true shift away from this problem by eliminating much of the input problem that text adventure games suffered by providing a list of useable verbs and nouns at the bottom of the screen, thus enabling the player to simply 'point and click'. *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007) have further developed the genre by the creation of gameworlds that appear to synthesise with the storyworld and afford the

¹⁰ <https://www.abandonware.com/abandonware-game.php?abandonware=The+Hobbit&gid=1014> [Accessed 10/08/2020]

player a truly interactive experience where they have agency to affect the outcome of the story which is now the expected norm of contemporary action adventure videogames.

The split that followed Colossal Cave Adventure allowed hypertext stories to build their storyworld in the minds of their readers in the same way that a literary text does, and this fact places these ‘storytelling artefacts’ (a term we will be returning to) clearly into the category of experimental literature, not games. Point and Click games foreground their (visual) gameworld, and are thus easily defined as videogames, despite their often narrative-rich (and textually mediated) experience for players. As will be seen, one of the fundamental elements of the Walking Simulator is its lack of challenge, contest, or a win/lose binary outcome, which Point and Click games have as a crucial part of their game system as the player cannot progress further unless they have matched the appropriate verb in the correct order with the relevant artefact. Likewise, Action-Adventure games also demand similar puzzle solving skills alongside fine motor skills of hitting the correct keys or buttons in a required order at speed. In short, a gameworld emphasis places player physical interaction within the technical mediality of the videogame and storyworld places intellectual interaction within the imagination of the player, or reader.

Having discussed the early evolution of ludic texts and the split between those forms based around text versus those multimodal artefacts based around dense visual gameworlds it will now be useful to examine where Walking Simulators situate themselves within this landscape, before proceeding to a formal definition of the genre in chapter 6. Journalists, researchers and game developers refer to Walking Simulators as games, but not without a number of commentators insisting that this multimodal exploratory storytelling artefact is not a true game. Ryan Rigney writing in 2013 for *Wired Magazine*, asserts that *The Novelist* (Hudson 2013) does not ‘work’ as a videogame. This is not an uncommon viewpoint from forum members on Steam, as we will see in the case studies. Many game critics also hold this view which relates directly to the moniker of Walking Simulator as a pejorative term from many players for this genre as it has no obvious winnable goal. American academic Ian Bogost wrote in *The Atlantic* magazine (2017)¹¹ questioning whether Walking Simulators can or should be viewed as games when there is little ‘gameplay’ and much of the storytelling, in his opinion, would be better performed in a film or television show. The article garnered a considerable amount of reader comments which have now (by August 2018) been removed. Among the

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/> [Accessed 29/04/2017, 3/08/2018]

wider ‘gamer’ community there has been considerable debate about the nature of Walking Simulators and whether they are games or not: Rigney (2013), Goodwin (2014), Mullis (2013), Barda (2014), with Oscar Barda (games developer and co-founder of Them Games company) suggesting that the central problem within the community and among developers is that this genre presents a threat to the established definition of games. As outlined above, the Walking Simulator are situated within a liminal space where they have the appearance of games as we access them via gaming platforms of PC or console, yet they provide rich storytelling experiences with little challenge or conflict which are central elements of videogames, as we will see in the forthcoming chapters. They also foreground text; thus, Walking Simulators have more common ground with interactive hyperfiction than videogames.

Dan Pinchbeck, writer of *Dear Esther* (2012), as will be seen, a leading ‘Walking Simulator’ title, is quoted in an article published online (Campbell 2016) that discusses whether Walking Simulators are games or not, and makes the point that in order to decide if these are games we must agree upon a definition of a game. It is within this controversy that this thesis can be contextualised. The ‘controversy’ has important scholarly implications too, speaking to the ‘broadening’ of the categories

of what might be considered ‘merely a game’ and what might be considered to be in some sense ‘literary’. The split between hypertext games like Zork and point and click games with an on-screen gameworld such as Tomb Raider prefigures a debate in academic circles about where to draw the line between ‘texts’ and ‘games’ within the context of the evolving videogame genre. We turn to the latter first in the next chapter, in order to establish some baseline criteria for ‘games’ to apply to our case studies in chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Chapter 3 What's in a game? Ludology

3.1 Introduction

In a thesis concerned with an emerging genre which moves between game and literary text it will be useful to begin by briefly examining the concept of play. Huizinga (1938) divided play into two categories: *paidia*, a free unstructured form of playfulness enjoyed by children; and *ludus*, the rule-based play of games. Ludus, according to Caillois, works in conjunction with learning as the player will acquire skills and eventual mastery which will then provide satisfaction because this will result in winning (Caillois 1961 trans.). Ludus, rather than *paidia*, is of interest and importance to this thesis because videogames are ludic artefacts, as this chapter will establish as we first define the term 'game' and then different types of games. Caillois categorised types of game that can be applied to videogames and are set out later in this chapter as this will initially aid location of the Walking Simulator within the domain of games if they can be positioned within Caillois's categories.

Ludology is not the only useful framework for analysing and locating Walking Simulators. Ensslin's ludostylistics framework (2014: 53-54) offers

an essential starting point for defining any type of literary videogame.

Ensslin describes any digital game play that foregrounds language and has both 'readerly and playerly characteristics' (2014: 1) as a literary game. This thesis argues that Walking Simulators occupy a liminal space between literary text and games, or what we might describe as 'ludic' experiences. Ensslin's ludostylistics framework will be useful in interrogating Walking Simulators to identify their location between literary text and game, beyond Caillois's categories of game because we will be able to draw upon a literary domain which we will turn to in chapter 4.

This chapter will also cover those cognitive concepts useful for understanding how videogames gain and maintain player engagement. Three approaches are described within this chapter: hyperattention, flow immersion, and deictic shift theory. Identification of these cognitive processes commonly experienced by players of videogames will further aid the location of Walking Simulators within the appropriate digital domain.

3.2 Ludology Overview

In 1982 psychologist Csikszentmihalyi coined the term *ludology* in an article on the comparisons between human and animal play (1982), Frasca adopted this term for those scholars concerned with play and games (1999, 2001), and the game studies community has continued using this term since the turn of the 21st Century. Game studies, or *ludology* brings the academic study of play and gaming together and builds upon the work of Huizinga and Caillois to develop wider readings of rules and game structure. Most notable within ludology, for videogames, is the work of Frasca (1999, 2001, 2003, 2007), who has mapped out the field and addressed the issue of its apparent opposition to narratology (2003). Frasca suggests in his 2003 paper that any foregrounding or favouring of ludology or narratology over the other is a non-existent debate within the growing field of game studies. The issue, in brief, is that traditional literary studies offer no categorisation for the experience of games that include narrative (Ryan 2001), and by that suggestion researchers in game studies should reject narrative as a useful element for games. However, rather than an opposition to considering story as an element of videogames leading scholars within ludology point to narrative as being

an increasing element in many recent videogames: Juul (2001), Jenkins (2004), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Aarseth (1997), Pearce (2002), Murray (1997), Wolf (2001). Ludologists do not wish to exclude narrative from any analysis of videogames (Frasca 2003), but Eskelinen suggests that literary texts demand the reader engage with all the text to make sense of it, whereas videogames do not demand the player experience every possible event programmed by the developer to make sense of and win the game (Eskelinen, 2001). A key difference between videogames and literature is that repetition and experience lead to successful gaming experiences, whereas interpretation and reasoning leads to successful reading experiences. We will return to this point because Eskelinen's suggestion may be as useful one when we examine cognitive responses to *Walking Simulators*, and one that we will return to in the next chapter and the case studies.

3.3 What is a game?

Salen and Zimmerman build upon and synthesise earlier definitions of 'game' from Parlett (1999), Abt (1987), Huizinga (1938), Caillois (1961 trans.), Suits (2014), Crawford (2002), Costikyan (1998), and Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971). Salen and Zimmerman's definition is used within this thesis as well as elements from Huizinga on play, and Caillois on categories of games.

A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 80)

They are very clear that this definition applies to traditional parlour games, sports, and digital videogames (2003: 80), and as such it is this definition that is used in this thesis. Their definition provides us with key elements of a game that need further scrutiny: system, engagement, artificial conflict, rules, and quantifiable outcome as some are of more use, particularly when we turn to the ludostylistics framework later within this chapter.

Salen and Zimmerman define a system as a 'set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 55) objects,

attributes, internal relationships, and environment. However, this could apply to almost anything and thus is of little use in establishing whether an artefact is a game or not.

Their second element, engagement, is of more use. Games require engagement of the participants, the players, and without this engagement there is no game. Whether scrutinising board games, card games, or videogames, without player engagement the game does not exist. This is self-evident when considering videogames because without the player actions of switching on the PC or console and then pressing the appropriate buttons or keys to select the desired title and then pressing 'start' no game will be activated for play and thus engagement. However, once a videogame commences the type and intensity of the player engagement differs according to the game type; 'shoot 'em up' titles such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) or *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) demand considerable concentration and hand-eye co-ordination, whereas Walking Simulators like *Virginia* (505 Games 2016) demand concentration but very little hand-eye co-ordination beyond pointing and clicking the mouse. Thus, we need a list of types of game, and here Caillois's work on game classification is central to identifying how these can be applied to videogames and where Walking Simulators may be situated.

Artificial conflict is evident in many games played individually or as a team: football, rugby, chess, Monopoly, and so on. In videogames, this is shown in racing games, board game simulators such as chess, fighting games such as *Street Fighter* (Capcom 1987), and games like *PacMan* (Namco 1980).

Rules are the most obvious definition of a game, but again this term is broad and almost universal to many entertainments and endeavours.

Traditional games like chess or Monopoly can have players breaking rules by cheating - carrying out illegal moves, hiding or stealing money, and so on. Therefore, players of traditional games can develop their own personal version of Monopoly, for example, and indeed many families have personalised rules whereby additional penalties or rewards are included during gameplay - all fees placed in the centre of the board and then claimed by the first player to land on the Free Parking square, for example. Rules are intrinsic to videogames because computing is a rule-based system; the method by which videogames are created and accessed uses mathematical algorithms and these make up the game's system. Through a keyboard and screen the developer has created the videogame experience within the boundaries of machine code by inputting programming language. The rules of a videogame, because of their

mathematical system of programming, do not provide affordances for players to cheat, or personalise their gameplay - it is impossible to skip to the end without going through all the preceding stages, and it is impossible to carry out illegal moves, or in any other way transgress unless the programmed coding is altered. This does of course side-step short-cuts embedded in the coding by developers who often need quick routes to different sections of gameplay during testing. These short-cuts are then released as 'cheats' for those players unable or unwilling to suffer harder sections of the game and wish to skip them to reach the next or more interesting part. This is not true transgressive cheating as it has been coded into the game, unlike a player stealing from the bank in Monopoly. This is not to say that it is entirely impossible for a videogame to break established rules - it is the developers, the coders who are able to transgress in the same way that the writer of experimental fiction or poetry can transgress the rules of literature.

3.3.1 Types of Game

Caillois explains that games are ludic play; their artificial conflict and rules can be further categorised into different forms of games. This

categorisation may thus allow us to situate Walking Simulators within one of these forms. Caillois suggests only four types which apply to all games, but for the purposes of this thesis we will also draw mainly upon videogames.

Caillois's first game category is *agon*, meaning competition, or confrontation with an outcome of one player or team bettering the other (2001: 14). In video games this term would apply to racing games, board game simulators such as chess, fighting games such as *Street Fighter* (Capcom 1987), games like *PacMan* (Iwatana 1980). Until the arrival of reliable broadband internet connections at the beginning of the 21st Century, most video games featuring *agon* were played singly against a rudimentary artificial intelligence (AI) provided by the game mechanics in the form of a predefined adversary, in the case of fighting games like *Street Fighter*.

The second category is *alea* which is defined as games of chance where skill or effort are not necessary. Videogames that offer *alea* are most commonly of a gambling type like roulette or slot machines and are often categorised as 'casual' games as they can be played easily because of their real-world counterparts. The lack of any skill demanded to play these games also makes them a favourite amongst people who do not have time

or desire to learn how to master them. Despite the lack of skills or effort necessary, alea type games offer satisfaction to players through gaining high scores. Games like *Coin Dozer* (Duffy 2011) generally allow the amassing of points which can sometimes be used to 'purchase' extra lives; real financial transactions are unnecessary, but often built into this type of game.

Caillois explains that many games are a mixture of both *agon* and *alea* (1961 trans.: 134-5). This is evident in many popular video games where players build up certain skills that are required for competitive combat, but often the element of chance is central to maintaining player interest, rather than the game becoming easier with greater familiarity. An example of this is popular platform games such as *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) as these tend to allow the player to learn the necessary kinetic skills in order to succeed but will also include random elements within the game for which the player may be unprepared, and thus maintain their interest as they become increasingly skilful.

The third category that Caillois suggests is that of *mimicry* which in real world games are those usually played by children where they make-believe adult behaviours: dolls standing in for babies, toy kitchens for real ones, and so on. For videogames this category can be found in the

simulation game. Players of simulation games can imagine themselves as train drivers, pilots, football managers, even farmers. Unlike the real-world make-believe of children, the simulation game often requires considerable organisational skill and repeated play to learn how to succeed.

Caillois's final category is *ilinx*, which he describes as physical games that induce vertigo, giving horse riding, downhill racing, tightrope walking and similar as examples of this type of game. He also includes those games that are transgressive such as 'noisily banging garbage cans', or 'creating an avalanche of the snow on a rooftop' (Caillois 1961 trans.: 24).

Caillois provides many parallels taken from the animal kingdom in his various examples of each type of game classification, and within *ilinx* one of his examples is of a dog chasing its tail. For videogames the closest type that feature *ilinx* are those played using Virtual Reality (VR) headsets, and while this development is outside the remit of this thesis it may be that Walking Simulators soon utilise this technological development.

3.4 Functional Ludostylistics

Having set out a workable categorisation of game types, it will be useful now to turn to a critical framework which sets out to position videogames as artefacts within a spectrum situated in the space between games and literary texts and where the Walking Simulator can be found. We saw in the previous chapter that scholars have remained somewhat siloed within game studies or literary studies, hence the ‘debate’ between ludology and narratology. Ensslin’s development of functional ludostylistics (2014: 53-54) neatly draws together the related domains of game and literary studies and provides a framework designed to fuse ‘the seemingly alien worlds’ of game and literature (2014: 5), and allows the mapping of these ‘hybrid’ texts within this spectrum that spans the gap between the two fields. Ensslin’s framework is useful for analysis of digital literature, interactive fiction, and videogames. The framework utilises ludology elements of rules and types of games (as defined by Caillois) already discussed within this chapter, and below is a brief outline of gameworld and agency as realised in videogames.

Tabular overview of functional ludostylistics.

| Component | Aspects | Examples | | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------|---|--|---|
| Ludology | Rules | Game mechanics; aims and objectives; tools and methods | Ludosemiotics | External narrativity | Player narratives, for example, playthroughs, walkthroughs; metaleptic narratives; transmediation | |
| | Gameplay | Player actions, moves, and hardware/software interactions | | Interface design | Graphics; art work; gameworld; 3D/2.5D/2D; settings and props; menus | |
| | Game architecture | Level structure; progress | | Verbal language | Written vs. spoken; foregrounding; stylistic considerations; poetry–prose–dialogue; segmental and sentential levels of linguistic analysis | |
| | Victory and termination conditions | Winning and losing; number of lives; game ending | | Text and discourse | Textual macrostructure; linearity; discursive and social embedding; context and subtext; pragmatics (speech acts, implicature, etc.); themes, topics, and argument structure; cohesion and coherence; monologue vs. dialogue | |
| | Risks and challenges | Threats; dangers; obstacles; difficulty levels | | Procedural rhetoric | Algorithmic encoding of rhetorical purposes (e.g. educational; polemic; religious; see Bogost [2007]) | |
| | Feedback | Rewards; penalties; feedback code | | Multimodality | Semiotic modes other than language (image and sound) and their relationship with linguistic elements; clusters; complex meanings and their social and aesthetic embedding; haptic interaction | |
| | Agency | (Illusory) player agency; freedom; sandboxing; choice | | Mediality | Platform | PC; console; mobile device; online/ offline; data carrier |
| | Game genre | For example, platform, shooter, adventure, role-playing | | | Hardware | Keyboard; mouse; controller |
| | Types of play | Paidia, ludus; agon, mimicry, ilinx, alea (Caillois 2001), rhythmos | | | Software/program code | Flash; Shockwave; Java; HTML; php; C++ . . . |
| | Ludonarratology | In-game narrative | | Game/storyworld (settings, props); points of view; showing vs. telling; player-character/avatar; cutscenes; backstory; voice-over; NPCs; plot types | | Ergodicity |
| Game-story relationship | | Coherence; consistency; narrative level design | | Textuality | Self-reflexivity; remediation; intermediality; paratextuality; transmediation; and other intra- and intertextual processes | |

Table 2: Functional Ludostylistics (Ensslin 2014: 53-54)

From Ensslin’s ludology component within the framework we have examined types of play as a central method of discriminating the domain that Walking Simulators might be positioned within. We will turn to gameworld and agency in the next section below, and elements such as rules, game architecture, victory, and feedback will be evident within the case studies where we will investigate each title’s gameworld. We will turn to ludonarratology in the next chapter; in particular storyworld, and the types of narrativity evident in Walking Simulators. In chapter 5, after having addressed both the ‘gamerly and readerly’ (Ensslin, 2014: 1) elements necessary to situate Walking Simulators, we will be able to turn to the final ludonarratology element of external narrativity when examining Gamer Forums. Ludosemiotics from Ensslin’s model has been

largely excluded for the purposes of this thesis. The aspects of ludosemiotics that Ensslin describes: interface design, verbal language, text and discourse, procedural rhetoric, and multimodality, are all rich areas of investigation when analysing the content of individual Walking Simulator titles, but this thesis is concerned with establishing a working definition of this new genre and focusing upon how these titles give rise to transportation immersion as found in participant feedback on Steam forums. Necessary limitations and boundaries of this thesis exclude close examination of ludosemiotics as they appear in Walking Simulators, but as we will see within the case studies multimodality, in particular, is inescapable.

Ensslin's final component of functional ludostylistics is that of mediality (which I also refer to as materiality), which is key to categorising Walking Simulators. Each aspect of this component: platform, hardware, software/program code, ergodicity, and textuality, are the same within videogames and Walking Simulators. Walking Simulators require a PC or games console, they use the same hardware, and the same programming software as videogames. Like videogames, the Walking Simulator demands 'non-trivial' interaction for the story to move forwards, and like videogames they also employ textual elements onscreen that provide a

remarkable similarity to videogames. In short, Walking Simulators and videogames share a common mediality; they appear to be just like other videogames in this respect.

The necessary elements for Walking Simulator analysis taken from this framework will be returned to detail in section 5.1 Ludostylistics Repurposed in preparation for the case studies.

3.4.1 Gameworld and Agency

The gameworld is the visual rendering onscreen of the developer's concept of the 'field of activity' (Ryan 2015: 63) in which the player interacts with the game itself. In other words, it is what we see and where our onscreen avatar appears and the medium through which it can be controlled. Videogames, as outlined above, rely upon the electronic equipment of a computer, and the coding language which results in the onscreen gameworld and its rules. In the related medium of film this is expressed as the setting and onscreen action, but as previously mentioned, videogames demand that participants (the players) perform a physical act to further the narrative or action onscreen within the gameworld, unlike film which requires a physically passive audience.

From the earliest video games like *Pong* (Atari 1972), arcade titles like *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981), through to First Person Shooter games like *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003), the player's attention is focused upon the onscreen action, which is the virtual space generated by pixels and computer code - the gameworld. This interaction with the gameworld is achieved and maintained by the physical actions and reactions the player makes in the real world with the handheld game controller, and then electronically translated to the screen and gameworld. Their *agency*, or ability to affect or control elements within this created world, is limited to the boundaries of the coding, and in general it is unlikely, and at times impossible, to accomplish any unintended actions or outcomes. On the rare occasions that players discover an unintended action it is generally termed a 'glitch' or 'bug' and the offending code is repaired by a subsequent patch issued by the developers in the case of those games downloaded and played via online platforms like Steam and the PlayStation Network. Despite limited agency offered by the gameworld, players are still experiencing the role of tennis player, soldier, or whichever character the game provides because this role playing is a fundamental part of all video games (Walker 2000). Role-playing demands that the players imagine themselves as the character assigned or chosen

by them, and often displayed onscreen within the gameworld. As an element of the gameworld, the role may be as visually developed as a soldier in *Call of Duty*, or as simple as an implied tennis player in *Pong*. The gameworld of a videogame is inherently multimodal; it is a blend of image, text, and sound. In the earliest arcade games this multimodality was sometimes no more than an image with text overlaid that provided the instruction, 'To Start Press Player One', or similar. *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976) text game has simple computer graphic images that accompany the text that begins with 'Welcome to Adventure!! Would you like instructions?' This use of second person address, 'you', explicitly draws the player into the gameworld (Walker, 2000: 9). As Walker explains, once 'you' are within the gameworld you now have a role to fill that enables the game to begin.

Becoming an active participant within a gameworld requires the ability to exert control of some sort over that world, or in other words, agency, which is often regarded as a 'key factor' for players in choosing videogames (Knoll 2015: 207). Janet Murray, writing in her 1997 influential book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, provides the canonical definition for agency in terms of digital media:

Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of

our decisions and choices (Murray 1997: 126)

The particularly important detail to note here is that Murray says ‘our’ and not the avatar or character; videogames offer the player the opportunity to become actor/enactor within the virtual space of the gameworld, rather than, as Perlin points out, the observational occupation of the fiction reader where we relinquish our right to make choices and instead the agency of the story’s protagonist is foremost (Perlin 2006: 14). This ‘shift’ that we undergo from real world to gameworld where we become embodied onscreen in our avatar is a crucial point here and I will return to this later within this chapter and in the next chapter when discussing the implications of cognitive approaches such as Deictic Shift Theory to ludic and literary agency and immersion; for now, it is sufficient to note that players see a version of themselves onscreen through the avatar.

Murray explains that the ‘electronic environments’ (Murray 1997: 53) as she describes games and other software, generally provide us with structured formulas and rules for participation - clicking menus, for example. These participatory rules would not be sufficiently involving to count as agency. For agency to exist we must have more than interaction; we must believe we have power or control over the outcomes of our

interactivity. Likewise, Knoll suggests that while the player of *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) may believe they have player agency, their limited control is over weaponry choice and movement (Knoll 2015: 211) and while this may affect the outcome it is always a binary outcome of win or lose, 'survive' or 'die'. Murray suggests that spatial navigation provides one form of agency in games - we generally have control over where we explore in many games; however, this is still tightly boundaried by the game system. We cannot leave the field of battle, for example, in *Call of Duty*, or explore different areas, unless the system has unlocked them for us.

In summary: the notion of agency in a videogame is restricted to the limited ability to move around within the gameworld - what Murray calls 'spatial agency' (1997: 129). Beyond this a player has no more agency than that of reader with a book; one interacts correctly with the media or not, and what counts as 'correctly' is set by the parameters or rules of that medium.

3.5 Cognitive Approaches

Games require *cognitive engagement* of the participants, the players, and without this engagement there is no game. Stockwell describes cognition as ‘mental processes’ (Stockwell 2019: 6) necessarily involved in reading, but games have many similar cognitive demands: we engage with the games, concentrate, become involved, and often feel ourselves embodied on the screen in the case of videogames. However, as outlined earlier in this chapter in section 3.3, the engagement differs according to type of games; ‘shoot ‘em up’ demanding hand-eye co-ordination, whereas Walking Simulators demand concentration. Cognitive engagement for videogames, and particularly for Walking Simulators and this thesis necessitates further explanation and clarification about attention and immersion.

3.5.1 Hyperattention

Although it might seem a statement of the obvious, nonetheless: the experience of reading a novel and playing a videogame are different. This

is not least of all because a novel, or literary texts in general, allow the reader to mentally create their version of characters, setting, and so on, based upon the author's language choices. On the other hand, videogames' inherent multimodality provides visual description of the characters, setting and so on, and allow the player to interact physically and mentally with that world. Hayles suggests that a 'shift in cognitive styles can be seen in the contrast between deep attention and hyper attention' (Hayles 2007: 187) to describe the different experiences of reading versus playing. Reading a novel requires *deep attention*, while playing a videogame entails *hyperattention*. Let us first look at this notion of hyperattention and how this cognitive process operates when we play videogames.

Hyperattention is a type of rapid reading that skims rather than deeply engages, and as such it is a recent phenomenon. Hayles uses the contrast between someone reading *Pride and Prejudice* as an illustration of deep attention (which we will turn to in the next chapter), and another playing the videogame *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* (Rockstar Games 1997) as hyperattention. Hayles describes hyperattention as being

characterised by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom (Hayles, 2007: 187)

This multitasking ability to take in multiple streams of information and rapidly switch an intense focus as commonly seen when using the Internet (Hayles, 2007: 187) is, as Hayles describes it, a 'cognitive' mode, but the player immersed in *GTA* is not only engaging in intellectual multitasking, but also physical actions in response to the stimuli within the onscreen gameworld. In other words, when playing a traditional First-Person Shooter type game, the player must continue to scan the onscreen gameworld for opponents and then respond physically by hitting keys or button on their controller in the real world to affect action that may result in winning the onscreen battle, firing a gun, or similar. Traditional videogames developed from arcade games which required the player to have an intense focus upon the screen *and* a rapid physical response to what they saw, First Person Shooter games such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003), for example, demand more than hyperattention as the player is faced with multiple visual and auditory stimulation input from the gameworld that must be rapidly processed and then acted upon to continue gameplay and avoid onscreen death. First Person Shooter videogames demand that the player attends to possible dangers onscreen as part of the gameworld as well as manoeuvring the onscreen avatar by way of a hand-held controller that requires rapid input of strings of key-

presses and joystick pushes. Engagement with the gameworld of a videogame generally requires intense hyperattention because this is the way that videogames from their earliest iterations as ‘machines designed to kick the coins out of you’ (Barda 2014) have developed - demanding skill and speed to stay in the game. Skill and speed are central to most traditional or archetypal (and often ‘Triple A’)¹² videogames: First Person Shooters, racing games, and even adventure games like *Assassin’s Creed* (Désilets, Raymond, and May 2007). These central features have become a crucial part of their gameworld because an effect of hyperattention to surroundings is the ‘prevention of boredom’ (Ensslin 2014: 39), (Hayles 2007: 187), and to keep players both engaged and returning to the gameworld it must present an attractive challenge for them to overcome.

3.5.2 Flow Immersion

Once the attention of the participant has been gained by the player of a videogame, they will become immersed into the gameworld and this

¹² AAA games is a term used by the games industry to describe those games that have a large budget for both advertising and development - the equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster in film (Gamedev.net). 2008)

immersion is of a particular order, that of flow immersion. The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997a, 1997b, 1999) on intrinsic motivation and enjoyment is regularly quoted by scholars discussing immersion in videogames (Heron and Belford (2015), Giddings and Kennedy (2006), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Juul (2004), Schell (2014), Frasca (2007), Mason (2013), and many more). For Csikszentmihalyi (and later Jeanne Nakamura), flow is the:

experience of engaging just-manageable challenges by tackling a series of goals, continuously processing feedback about progress, and adjusting action based on this feedback. Under these conditions, experience seamlessly unfolds from moment to moment (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009: 90)

This description easily describes the process of playing a videogame and agrees with Salen and Zimmerman's definition of a game as engaging in an artificial conflict or challenge. The player enters the gameworld, engages in conflict which provides challenges and with each unsuccessful attempt the player adapts their onscreen actions until they succeed. Each successful attempt affords this seamless unfolding of onscreen events until the quantifiable outcome of game completion is achieved (Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 80). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi put forward various requirements for a flow state to be achieved based upon their research with chess players, rock climbers, dancers, and even surgeons (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009: 89), but they do not include

narrative immersion and instead focus upon action, awareness, agency, and rewards. They reference Susan K Perry (1999) as an example of flow as a feature of literary writing, but in my opinion, this is an incorrect application of flow. Writing, like reading, requires a deictic shift from the writer into a storyworld and thus the writer imagines the action rather than performing it, immersion arising from this phenomenon is transportation, as we will see in the next chapter, and not flow which has a physical requirement. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi explain that flow states were measured to be higher in their research when participants were active and not passive (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009: 96). Possibly the physical action of writing either longhand or typing may give rise to an element of flow. Imagining a plot and storyworld is not a skill in the same way that rock climbing, or surgery can be described as skilled activities because they draw upon established methods of physical movement applied to new surroundings. Creating a storyworld and plot may ultimately map onto a basic plot and characters as Booker (2004) and Propp (2010), along with other structuralist approaches, have described, but these are intellectual archetypes, not mechanically repeatable skills. A correctly programmed robot, for example, can climb a rock face and undoubtedly soon will be able to carry out simple surgery, but it cannot

create a unique storyworld and plot, yet. The immersion of writing creatively and reading fiction is found in transportation which will be considered in the next chapter, not flow as explained here. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi describe the characteristics of being in flow as:

Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment

- Merging of action and awareness
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009: 90)

Flow arises in video games from the *physical* interaction of the player onscreen with the gameworld and as the player successfully meets each condition of the gameworld rules, so they are allowed progression onto the next level and a new challenge. Flow is brought about by physical movement that is often repetitive, and by allowing the body to move in a way that is familiar and does not require the conscious mind to actively engage.

It is important to establish here that flow immersion is not what readers

experience. Tal-Or and Cohen writing in 2010 explained that Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow immersion relies upon 'a specific activity that is part of their immediate reality' (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010: 405), but, as we will see next when we turn to transportation immersion in the next chapter, this requires, according to Busselle and Bilandzic, a focus upon an alternative reality (2009: 324). However, a videogame does not offer immediate reality; instead, it is an alternative, but crucially a traditional videogame demands physical interaction. The player responds to onscreen gameworld events via the controller generally held in their hands and often the feedback received from the gameworld is visual, auditory, and kinetic with some controllers vibrating when appropriate. This is clearly an experience that can give rise to flow.

3.5.3 Deictic Shift Theory (Ludic)

If the flow immersion associated with gamerly interaction is mechanical in nature, to what extent does the player experience immersion of other kinds, e.g., through identification or empathising with the on-screen avatar? We have now seen how gamers physically interact with onscreen events when playing videogames, and we can account for the cognitive

element that allows the player to position themselves onscreen and identify or empathise with that avatar if we use *Deictic Shift Theory*. Deixis is the language used to describe the necessary cognitive sensory process that enables us to define reality (Lakoff 1999: 17) in spatial terms, and those ‘aspects of meaning’ that allow us to orientate ourselves (Galbraith 1995: 21). Usually, deictic language is used in connection with reading and Stockwell suggests that readers are ‘pushed’ into a ‘deictic field’ (Stockwell 2005: 47) allows an examination of stylistic elements in literary texts to better understand where audiences position themselves in relation to the story characters, as we will see in the next chapter. With videogames deictic shift theory can be used to explain the shift experienced by players which is a gradual descent into the gameworld created by the materiality of technology. The diagram below describes the deictic shift into videogames.

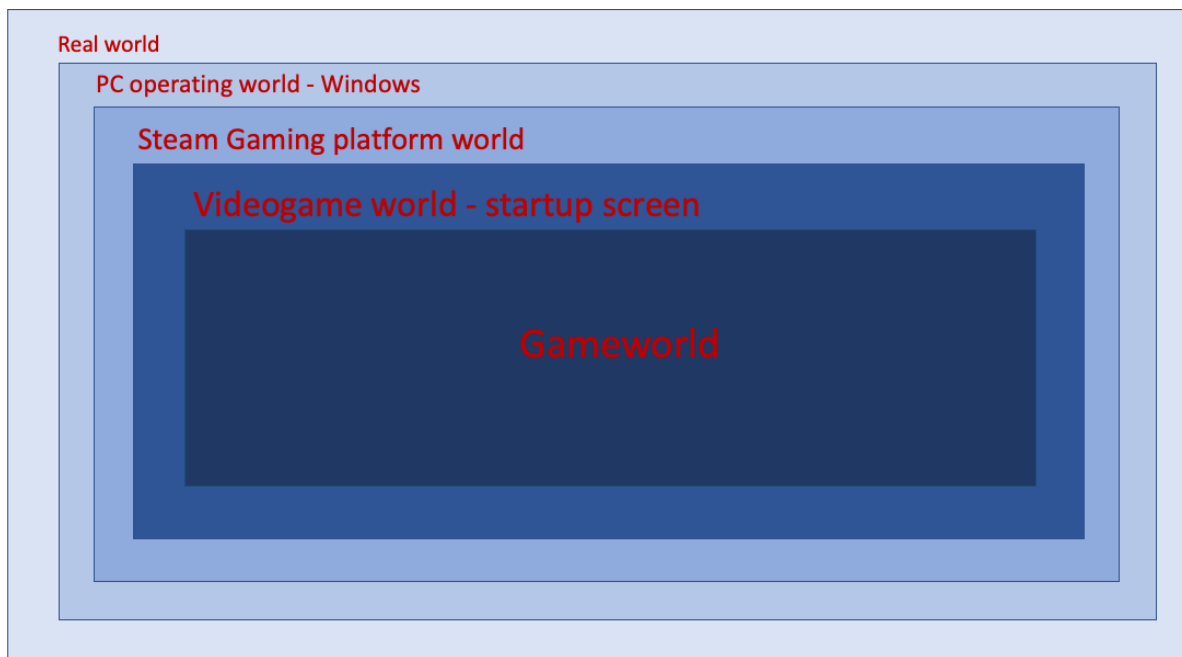


Figure 7: Ludic Deictic Shift

The player interacts with their PC (or console) by switching it on, then navigating the Windows (or similar) operating system to go online or to the Steam gaming platform. The first action of switching on the PC is the physical pressing of a button but the second and subsequent actions are both physical (moving a mouse and clicking) and onscreen as the cursor moves in reaction to the player's physical movement. This onscreen reaction is continued in the gameworld where the player will often have an avatar who moves in concert with mouse, keyboard, or joypad interaction from the player in the real world. This gradual deictic shift for the player is from real world individual to online participant as they join the gaming platform, and then a final cognitive shift into the onscreen avatar where the player may be part of a team of online participants

fighting similar opponents or a lone adventurer battling against onscreen computer-generated opponents.

Thon uses the term 'shift of attention' (2008: 30) to describe the immersion felt by players of videogames, and this offers a pleasing coalescing of term here as readers experience a shift in deixis as we will see in the next chapter, and gamers a shift in attention, both a psychological virtual move to another world away from reality. The shift from one world into another is described as a 'push' and being pulled out of it a 'pop' by Galbraith (1995: 47), but what is more interesting (and for the purposes of this thesis, particularly pleasing) is Galbraith's admission that the terms were borrowed from 'computer science' (ibid). These terms are commonly used to describe the addition or removal of information from data stacks, and these correlate, metaphorically at the very least, with the player's deictic pushes into and pops out of the gameworld. The first parts of the shift are created actively by the player; the selection of onscreen symbols to activate the game platform and the game title. Once the 'start' button has been clicked the player is pushed into the gameworld by flow immersion. This **embodied active deictic shift** is cemented by flow immersion where the participant is embodied onscreen within an avatar, which is often customisable to increase personal

involvement and projection. The player has agency within the rules of the gameworld and thus control over the (often binary) outcome. Once the player loses the game by their avatar being killed (as is common in traditional videogames) they experience a 'pop' out of the gameworld and back into either the startup screen, or the real world while they wait for their avatar to be revived or 'respawned' and another 'push' back into the gameworld can begin.

Identification of the cognitive process or experience in a videogame will allow us to compare those reported experiences with that of readers, and thus begin to classify Walking Simulators as either a ludic experience with an embodied active deictic shift, or a readerly experience with the attendant deictic shift, which we will turn to now.

Chapter 4 Literariness

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter defined games and identified the key areas of scholarship that can help answer the question of how to classify Walking

Simulators within the field of ludology, and in terms of the parameters set out by the scholarship within that field. It is necessary now to turn to the other side of this 'space' that the Walking Simulator occupies and establish what elements are shared with what will be referred to as *literary texts*. Literary criticism is a well-established major field and there is not an intention (or need) here to 'define literature' as such, but to highlight some useful identifiers of literariness drawn from literary stylistics which, while not exclusive to literary discourse, are almost always present within it. As mentioned, this term 'literary texts' is preferred over the broader term 'literature' or 'literariness' in order to align the approach taken here with that of literary stylistics more broadly, seeing 'literature' as a culturally - and socially- defined category rather than one that is identifiable from linguistic and stylistic features alone (Stockwell and Whiteley (2014), Cook (1994)).

This chapter provides a brief overview of the useful aspects of literary stylistic critical approaches that can be applied to Walking Simulators. These aspects may provide evidence to enable location of Walking Simulators within a literary domain: how the story is told (through a brief examination of relevant critical frameworks from narratology; Fludernik (2009); how the storyworld is created (Ryan 2015) and whether this

process allows agency for the reader (Aarseth 1997), (Perlin 2006), with some reference to cognitive poetics); how we make sense of our experience (Cook 1990, 1994); and finally, how we engage as readers with literary texts (Furlong (2008), Stockwell (2005, 2019).

4.2 Narrativity

A key feature of many literary reading experiences is, of course, concerned with the processing and, indeed, enjoyment of a narrative. The term ‘narrative’ can be understood and used in two forms: a story that is told, and the way the story is told. James Phelan and Peter J Rabinowitz define narrative, in a helpfully broad way, as ‘somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something’ (Herman et al. 2012: 3). Fludernik defines narrative as the act of narrating a discourse or story, but this further breaks down into story and plot, or *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Fludernik 2009: 2-4), as proposed by Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky (Shklovsky 1921). *Fabula*, often translated as ‘story’ provides a world in which the *syuzhet*, or plot can take place. It is the *fabula* that participants discuss within the

Steam forums, as we will see in the case study chapters, but it is the *syuzhet*, or discourse (in the case of video games self-evidently multimodal: textual, aural and visual), that we can examine for the method of plot mediation.

How a story is told, the way in which the plot unfolds, is useful here because some methods are common within literary texts yet rarely seen in traditional videogames and vice versa. Fludernik, for example, has written about the use of a second person address ('you') as a narration method (Fludernik 1994). This is an uncommon, but by no means unheard of, narrative form in literary texts, which tend to default to a first-person voice (Stanzel (1986), Simpson (1993)), or third-person ('authorial') as a norm. Second-person address in analogue narratives has been of interest to literary scholars certainly since Morrisette (1965) and subsequent articles that also make the connection to experimental and postmodern fiction, from which digital fiction has arisen (Fludernik (1993, 1994, 2014), Herman (1994)). Second person address however, has been a common feature in hypertext fiction (Bell and Ensslin (2011, 2012), Walker (2000)). It is common in videogames for the player to be directly addressed in the introductory or start-up screens with a simple direction to press start. Early text adventure games often began by locating the player, "You are

standing at the end of a road” (Crowther 1976), for example, and here this use of ‘you’ is addressed directly at the player and pushes them into the storyworld presented in the text.

Some forms of narrative structure are more commonly seen in hypertext or digital fiction and evident in some Walking Simulators, as we will see in the next chapter, but they are rarely (if ever) used in traditional videogames which suggests that Walking Simulators may share more literary or readerly features than gamerly features. A brief overview of some common narrative structures used by digital fiction is useful at this point as it will allow us to further categorise and identify these elements in Walking Simulators when we turn to them in the next chapter.

4.2.1 Digital Narratives

Linear narrative is the simplest and most familiar form of narrative and the type that we encounter first as infants. Fairy or folk tales tend to follow this model of one event followed by another, and in keeping with Forster (1970), simple cause and effect provides the plot. Traditional

videogames unfold in a linear fashion, in the typical 'space invader' type game we see this as enemy spaceships appear, we must shoot them, and then if we succeed in disposing of them all we will eventually reach the 'boss' of the level, in other words, event A is followed by event B if we are successful in the game conflict.

A repeated linear narrative is at first a linear narrative until it repeats telling almost the same story again, but each time with some slight alteration that affords a closer inspection of the plot and overall story with each retelling as the reader gains familiarity with salient points. Barbara Kingsolver utilised this form in *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) where the same series of events are retold from each of the main characters' point of view. Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013) also uses a repeated linear narrative as multiple versions of the protagonist's life are told, and parallels and differences become more apparent in each iteration. This is how traditional videogames tend to be played but unlike a narrative that offers slight differences with each retelling, the videogame is offered exactly the same each time and it is the player's behaviour that must alter for them to win. Any narrative within the videogame is repeated alongside elements of challenge or chance as the player either improves and gains necessary fine motor skills or succeeds in winning the chance

element that means the game and story can move on. Both literary text and videogame with repeated linear narratives foreground minor alterations either apparent in the text or necessary in the player's behaviour with those alterations leading to greater familiarity and understanding.

Exploratory linear narrative is exclusively digital and borrows a great deal from the videogame format as the reader must search the onscreen gameworld for parts of the narrative rather like a treasure hunt, but unlike a true game there is no winning or reward beyond gaining the narrative fragments. This method is seen in *Nightingale's Playground* (Campbell 2010) which is a piece of digital fiction in four parts, the first being browser based and demanding the reader explore the onscreen scene to discover fragments of text. This form of narrative structure affords some authorial control and plot tension because only the relevant parcels of text or audio are released within each onscreen area and the reader cannot progress further until they have discovered all the pieces. In traditional videogames the exploratory structure is used as part of the game's challenge with the reward being higher scores or additional lives with more elements discovered, but it is not commonly used as a narrative device in games. While an analogue literary text narrative may

offer motifs that can be identified within the text these are not true explorations necessary to understand the story or fabula, but rather elements that may enrich the experience of returning to reread the text and notice such features.

Non-linear narratives tend to appear in experimental novels like B S Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) which allows the reader to choose the order in which the story unfolds by selecting separately bound chapters that are presented in a box instead of bound together as a traditional book. *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien appears at first to be a collection of short stories linked together by a common theme of the Vietnam War, but as each story is read so the overall story becomes apparent and on completion the experience is very similar to that of reading a traditional novel. Film and television have increasingly utilised non-linear narration as an effective method for creating complex plots which demand the audience's complete attention (*Pulp Fiction* 1994, *Forrest Gump* 1994, *Titanic* 1997). Non-linear narration is perhaps the most demanding on readers because they must hold the threads of the narrative in their mind's created storyworld and organise or reorganise as each new piece of information is received.

Branching narratives are those which present the reader with choices for

the next part of the story. *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels which originally began to be published in the late 1970s for children gave short passages of text which ended with a choice and a page number attached to each choice, the reader would then turn to the directed page to follow their chosen branch of the narrative, continuing in the same way until the end. These books were the analogue version of text adventure games like Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), but the branching narrative was not entirely unknown before the 1970s.

Jorge Luis Borges's 1941 short story, *The Garden of Forking Paths* tells the stories of spies in WW1, but most importantly, how the main character, Dr Yu Tsun, an academic spying for the Germans, has solved the riddle of a strange book an ancestor of his wrote and called a labyrinth. The book has multiple endings and paths throughout, making each reading something fresh, new, and personal. Borges describes this in the text:

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pn, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. (Borges 1941)

Borges is describing a branching narrative which, in a digital age, is now easily created with parcels of text (hypertext) linked to each other and allowing the reader to choose their own path, but his short story is not

told in this narrative form; instead, it is the strange book described in the story. Writers of digital or electronic literature can now purchase software to aid the complicated process of writing a branching narrative; Eastgate¹³ Systems continues to sell Storyspace software to writers of hypertext, and the open-source software, Twine¹⁴ is popular not only for writers of hypertext but also as a development tool for designing branching narratives in video games. Storyspace and Twine remain more complex than the analogue method of notebook and pen because the writer must learn how to use the software before beginning to create any narrative.

Aside from technical complexities, there remains a more fundamental problem with branching narratives which is the lack of plot tension and thus authorial control. If we return to E M Forster's definition of a novel, he states it must have a plot, and for Forster this is explained thus:

A plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died', is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief', is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. (Forster 1970: 93-94)

This notion of a sequence of events and, more importantly, cause and effect are what give rise to plot tension, and this is hard to maintain if the

¹³ Eastgate Systems was founded in 1982. Its most well-known software is Storyspace, developed by Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce. Most of the hypertext fiction canon was published by Eastgate using their Storyspace software. They also remain at the forefront of Electronic Lit.

¹⁴ *Firewatch* begins with a Twine story that allows the audience to select and begin to create Henry's character as part of the backstory to the main narrative.

reader can choose to experience a text in any order they choose. Branching narratives would seem to offer this possibility. An author conceives a story which unfolds in a particular way and if this is overturned by the reader it no longer remains the author's story and instead it becomes a collaborative experience that demands the reader's close interaction and attention, and indeed this is often the case for Interactive Fiction, and simulation videogames like *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2004), *Zoo Tycoon* (Blue Fang Games 2001), *Theme Park World* (Bullfrog Productions 1999), and similar titles. They provide the tools for players to create their own narrative that emerges from their interaction with the gameworld provided.

4.3 Storyworld and Agency

Having examined and categorised a key feature of literary texts - their different forms of narrativity - and drawn parallels with video games and hypertext, we will move on to examine another key feature: the creation of storyworlds, and the extent to which readers of texts (and, by

extension) players of games, have agency in relation to the unfolding and mediation of that narrative.

Herman says that ‘worldmaking is the hallmark of narrative experiences’ (Herman et al. 2012: 14). The creation of a ‘world’ is vital to the processing of discourse (Gavins 2007: 8) and is a commonly analysed feature of narrative fiction. However, processes entailed in the *creation* of a storyworld is of most use for considering Walking Simulators. Gavins makes it clear that any text, both fiction and non-fiction, cue up a ‘world’ that unfolds conceptually within the mind of the reader. As we saw in the previous chapter (section 3.4.1), when players move from the actual world (or ‘discourse world’ in the terms of Text World Theory; Gavins (2007)) into a gameworld, they traverse a number of other ‘world boundaries’: the computer operating system, the gaming platform, and then the startup screen of the game which acts as a sort of waiting room or lobby before the player can finally enter the gameworld. Literary texts in the analogue form of a printed book offer some similar elements in the form of paratext (the author and publisher details, quotes from reviewers, and so on) which the reader likewise traverses without much attention.

Ryan defines this phenomenon of storyworld as ‘the semantic domain projected by the literary text is a non-actual possible world or an

alternative possible world' (Ryan 1991: 554), in other words, the very words, sentences, paragraphs and so on cue up a world in our imagination as we read the text, and, self-evidently, this conceptual world differs from the actual world. Herman describes storyworlds as 'mental models of the situations and events being recounted' (Herman 2009: 106) and as such readers inhabit these projected environments which are 'blends of cognitive and imaginative response' (Herman 2004: 17). Herman points out that it is the storyworlds and their power that explains the immersion experienced when readers engage with narratives, however they are presented (2004: 16). Ryan, therefore, provides us with a definition that situates storyworld as a semantic domain, but it is Herman who draws attention to the way readers engage with them which we will see in the case studies as well as later in this chapter when we turn to the cognitive approaches useful for investigating the literariness of Walking Simulators.

To illustrate a storyworld we can turn to any piece of fiction - here as an example is a very short excerpt from Aesop:

A Man and his Wife had the good fortune to possess a Goose which laid a Golden Egg every day. Lucky though they were, they soon began to think they were not getting rich fast enough, and, imagining the bird must be made of gold inside, they decided to kill it in order to secure the whole store of precious metal at once. But when they cut it open they found it was just like any other goose. Thus, they neither got rich all at once, as they had hoped, nor enjoyed any longer the daily addition to their wealth.(Jones and Rackham 1916)

Aesop, writing in the 6th Century BCE, imagined a world where a goose might lay a golden egg rather than a normal goose egg. Readers believe in this imagined version of the world, despite knowing its impossibility. We know, because of our experience of the world, that gold is an element generally dug out of the ground, and not laid by a bird. However, we know that birds lay eggs, many people keep domestic fowl such as geese for their eggs, and often the excess eggs are sold, Ryan calls this the Principle of Minimal Departure (Ryan 1980: 403-422) as the possible world described in the story is similar enough to the actual world for us to make sense of it. Aesop's fable creates an alternative world where birds also lay golden eggs by using language to refer to ideas and things or states of affairs that are not here and not 'now' which requires the addressee/reader to conceptualise a world (metaphorically speaking) in their imaginations. To do this, they draw on what they know about the actual world and combine this with information about the storyworld provided to them by the discourse, the fable in this example. They will default to their understanding of the actual world unless instructed otherwise by the text (Gavins 2007: 1-2). (The goose that lays a golden egg is exactly like a 'real' goose in my conceptualised world apart from the fact that it lays golden eggs.) In other words, writing or telling stories sets up

an imaginary space shared between the creator and audience where an alternative world is created. The real world of Aesop where he was a Phrygian slave over 2600 years ago is gone, but the worlds built by his stories continue for as long as these stories are accessed; (implied) author and reader can still share an alternative world across centuries.

A fundamental difference between gameworld and storyworld is found in the 'reality' of their propositions. A storyworld is only limited by the writer's imagination - they can describe magical and fantastical events where real or created characters interact with one another in an imaginary version of any real place and the reader then constructs this storyworld from the textual input created by the sender (author). People can come back to life, explore an afterlife, become millionaires, or be banished to the furthest reaches of an imaginary universe; in short, anything imaginable can be mediated and conveyed/transmitted, often multimodally.

The gameworld, in contrast, is always contingent upon the affordances of technology; in other words, until we have a Holodeck like that of *Star Trek*, we are better served by our imaginations for creating an alternative world. In contrast, a storyworld retains a certain amount of freedom for the reader because they can exercise their imaginations to the limit.

However, developments in processing power and speed have allowed computer imagery to become extremely sophisticated in both the film and game industry. In short, a gameworld requires a technological medium whereas storyworld, at its most basic, can be created in face-to-face interaction – through everyday conversational discourse, with one narrator mediating a recent experience for the benefit of a narratee, say. The creation of a storyworld requires only dreaming (Ryan 2012: 1), but the creation of a gameworld requires technology.

Storyworld creation by the audience requires information mediated, coded and passed from the author to the player-reader in some form; in literary texts this form is predominantly linguistic, in the case of Walking Simulators and other videogames, multimodal (entailing sound, audio, text, image, interaction via controllers etc.). This information about the nature of the story cannot be gleaned from the gameworld alone, crucially the audience must construct the storyworld in their imagination, conceptually, through re-presentation. Therefore, if evidence of a storyworld can be found in Walking Simulators then this suggests they share this element with literary texts. This evidence may easily be identified if the Walking Simulator features text or audio which refers to characters or events never shown onscreen within the gameworld, and

instead demand the audience imagine them.

We saw in Chapter 2 that in a videogame gameworld players are drawn in, or immersed, through having agency, as they can move around and have the appearance of control over the outcome of onscreen events. Aarseth suggests that the reader of a book has no agency - they may 'speculate' but they have no influence on the outcome (1997: 4), and this claim is echoed by Perlin (2006: 13). By way of contrast, Aarseth argues that the cybertext or hypertext reader is not a passive reader and the 'effort' required to interpret the text endows them with agency (Aarseth 1997: 4); in other words, the very act of puzzling over the hypertext fragments and then making a choice about which hyperlink to click upon next makes the reader active more than turning pages and this makes the digital text 'ergodic'- requiring non-trivial cognitive effort to traverse and process. Processes of world-building are also likely to be more complex. The cybertext reader may be able to traverse the presented text in an order that appears to be of their choosing; however, there is nothing to stop the reader of a 'traditional' literary text that is printed on paper, and thus the reader being able to turn to the back page, or start in the middle, for example. The cybertext reader is always subject to the original choices and possibilities of the coder or developers who leave hyperlinks that lead to a

variety of pre-planned outcomes. However, Knoll suggests that this is similar to 'game agency' (Knoll 2015: 216), as it is where the system and structure of the game, or hypertext, exerts its control because player or cybertext reader can only behave in ways determined by the creator.

Here we have technological affordances coming into conflict with plot or story; digital materiality requires a system based upon mathematics.

Analogue materiality, the paper world of a novel, affords the ability to the reader to access the story at any point, unlike digital materiality which only offers access points provided by the creator. Thus, the reader of a book, in analogue form, has agency of access unlike the player of the videogame, who must play through each required section rather than turning to the end to discover the outcome. Aarseth argues that the analogue paperback offers a fixed authorial version of events (1997: 4), whereas the digital may offer something more unique or personalised based upon that mathematic algorithm. However, this is still an authorial¹⁵ version of events, albeit expanded. In other words, unless one were, for example, to read a novel selecting individual words randomly to create one's own story, it will always be that imagined by the author, but a

¹⁵ Aarseth makes the point that the concept of author is entrenched in literary debate and ideology and his use is 'as a label for the positions in a communications system in which the physical text is assembled, without any regard for the social or cognitive forces active in the process' (1997: 134) because otherwise both text and reader are relegated to a subordinate position at the expense of the author instead of an equal footing between the three terms.

digital story that has some sort of randomiser may produce a new story each time it is accessed because it is the algorithm that the developer has created and not necessarily the words that make up the story. It must be said though, that the main attraction of randomised stories or novels such as Nick Montfort's *Hard West Turn* (Montfort 2018) at the moment is the mathematical possibility rather than an engaging plot (Lea 2020). A computer algorithm can create syntactically correct textual elements like sentences, but they may not make pragmatic sense. A narrative algorithm may draw upon established narrative structures but currently it is unlikely that it will offer the same degree of nuance and engagement that a human author produces.

Even in the case of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), a famously experimental text, the reader, for example, can turn to any page at any time; the text is designed to be read that way, and insists upon that form of engagement. However, as Perlin explains, the reader will always be an observer without any *real* personal agency (for example, an ability to influence the outcome of the plot or direct the actions of characters that the author has not 'pre-ordained' in some way) other than that available to both analogue and digital readers or players: the freedom to put the story down and leave it unfinished (2006: 16). The player in a videogame

world has the *appearance* of agency, or what Knoll terms ‘player agency’ (2015: 216), as they can move around at will, carry out certain actions, and so on, but, in the same way, they cannot do anything not already prescribed (quite literally, within the coding) by the rules of the gameworld; they can only see and hear what the developers want them to see and hear because the gameworld displays the imaginative vision of the creators alone, and they cannot have any other outcome(s) than those already set down in the coding by the developers; additionally, they cannot skip to the end as the reader of a book is able to do so. A gameworld is a fixed and bounded closed world, and within those boundaries they are provided with the *appearance* of agency and the identification with a character or avatar rather than the vicarious observation afforded by text, but the player has little real agency beyond winning or losing because the coding procedures of the game will, like the story of a novel, already be mapped out. Literary texts, especially narrative fiction, entail the creation of a storyworld – a cognitive conceptualisation of a world based upon (primarily) linguistic input. As mentioned, and in contrast, videogames create a gameworld based on multimodal input. In addition, literary texts, even hypertext and the branching narratives of experimental fiction, can only ever create an illusion of agency. The

'world' the reader conceptualises and 'experiences' is, in the end, fenced off. Videogames ostensibly provide greater agency to the player, but this too is illusory and restricted by the materiality of the medium. Already, as Ensslin (2014) has pointed out, a continuum can be seen between the two artefacts, not least of which is that both are narrative driven, even if the ways in which their narratives are interacted with differ. It will be useful now to turn to the various cognitive approaches and another significant point of intersection: schema activation.

4.4 Cognitive Approaches

In the previous chapter we explored cognitive approaches relevant to videogames: the types of attention and levels of immersion experienced

by players while engaged in these activities. Similar categories are also found in readers while engaged in reading prose fiction and thus provide a useful counterpoint that we can return to again in chapter 5 when examining Walking Simulators.

4.4.1 Cook and Stockwell: Schema refreshment

Profoundly implicated in this process of world-building in response to multimodal input is the concept of *schema*. Cognitive psychologist Frederick Bartlett (1960) suggested that everyone's perception and experience of the real world is unique, as it is largely based upon their schema frameworks developed in their early years, and subsequently modified, refreshed and developed – and even completely replaced. In other words, these frameworks are created and expanded with each new experience and understanding of that experience is then based upon previous ones thus constituting personal schemas further adapted with new information (Bartlett 1960: 2). Schemas are dynamic, evolving conceptual systems that we use to make sense of the world around us, and are thus crucial in language processing. They also play a crucial role in our conceptualisation of literary texts and fictional worlds (Tooby and

Cosmides 2000: 22), and thus every storyworld is different for each participant as it is built from the raw materials of (broadly) idiosyncratic, subjective and complex sets of schemas leading to what Stockwell refers to as a 'textured' reading (2012). It is worth explaining here what Stockwell means by 'textured' reading, and by extension, a 'textured' storyworld. Stockwell (2019) suggests that a 'textured' world is one that offers a 'world of possibility' (2019: 144), in other words language, grammar, and context that is more suggestive rather than blandly descriptive. He also says in his earlier book, *Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* that 'texture is the experienced quality of textuality' (2009: 1). Textuality is, as Stockwell explains, what happens when we read a text. The writer produces a text which is marks on a page that the reader then decodes to words, grammar, context, and so on and this is the textuality, the cognitive process. The reader also brings to this textuality their own experiences, likes, dislikes, and knowledge which provides the texture which is the experience of textuality. A textured storyworld, therefore is one that by its suggestive nature (which could be described as showing and not telling) allows the reader to experience a more rich storyworld full of possibility. Cook argues that the basic principle of schema theory is that the reader interprets the text 'with the help of a knowledge structure activated from

memory' and this structure, the schema, allows the reader to 'fill in' necessary details (1990: 19). Stockwell calls this 'filling in' of details *conceptual dependency* (2019: 93); in other words, we have a schema based upon previous experience and expanded when new information disrupts this knowledge, thus our concepts are not static but continually evolving. For our purposes the most important detail within schema theory is that of *schema refreshment*, which Stockwell describes as:

a schema change that is ... in literature not so much of defamiliarisation as 'refamiliarisation'. Clearly, this is not a definition of literariness as a whole, but a definition of 'good' literature, or literature which is felt to have an impact or effect. (2019: 95)

When we encounter a literary text that activates schema refreshment for us by expanding our existing knowledge of a genre, for example, then it would be impactful or memorable. It has, quite literally, changed our minds. For example: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) takes well known folktales like Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, and so on, but each has been retold in a way that *refamiliarises* us (by re-storying the original) in the way that Stockwell describes. In one version of Little Red Riding Hood, 'The Company of Wolves', retold by Carter, the heroine, instead of being saved by a woodcutter, seduces the wolf after laughing at his threat to kill her. Carter's retelling allows the reader to utilise their existing folktale schema; then, it is refreshed by an encounter with the re-

telling. Indeed, Mason (2019) takes this process of schema refreshment to be an integral function and effect of intertextuality in general. It is crucial to note that this refreshment does not mean the older structure of knowledge is removed or overwritten somehow like computer memory, but rather that our conceptual framework expands to hold both the existing information and the new and allows them to integrate and blend.

Digital scholars Douglas and Hargadon (2000) suggest that if we understand more about immersion in digital texts we will know more about the pleasure of reading and playing videogames:

We lack knowledge of how, exactly, interactivity and the freedom to traverse through narratives and hypertexts relatively freely may enhance or inhibit our pleasure in the stories they contain. If we understand our audiences' affective experiences in reading hypertext fiction or playing interactive games, we can likewise begin to determine the types of stories, tools, and even interfaces that lend pleasure to the acts of reading and interacting with hypertext. (Douglas and Hargadon 2000: 153)

According to Douglas and Hargadon, if we know how interactivity enhances our pleasure, we can begin to work out what types of experiences elicit these feelings; they suggest using schema theory for this purpose as our previous experiences shape our expectations. They argue, further, that a text is more likely to be immersive for a reader if it conforms to existing schemas. In other words, the opposing processes of schema reinforcement and refreshment (which, as mentioned, can

sometimes blend, as in Carter's work) are important aspects of a textured and immersive reading experience. Crucially, as Douglas and Hargadon assert, the process occurs in interaction with both literary texts and video games.

4.4.2 Furlong: Non-spontaneous and non-cumulative interpretation

As we have seen, refreshment of our existing knowledge schemas (at the levels of text, genre and world) is a characteristically literary experience. Furlong, further, suggests that another characteristic of literary reading is its 'capacity to inspire or withstand rereading' (2008: 285). This rereading serves more than one purpose: to understand the text fully; or to enjoy the narrative again. Identification of the reader's intent can aid our understanding of the cognitive processes experienced and this may further inform our interpretation of Walking Simulators.

Furlong suggests that one reason for rereading a literary¹⁶ text is to gain greater insight and understanding: in the terms of pragmatics and relevance theory, 'an optimally relevant interpretation of the whole text' (Furlong 2008: 289). This type of rereading is described as *non-spontaneous interpretation* because the reader returns to the text to gain a more complex, nuanced and inclusive account that provides all possibilities that are plausible and then allows the reader to settle upon a 'core set of assumptions' (2008: 289) in reaching an interpretation. This is the type of rereading that we may undertake while reading a complex text or a piece of poetry (as opposed to discourse that is purely informative, such as a brief email about a deadline), and it is from our rereading that we gain greater understanding. This has some echo in videogames where players return to challenging sections and replay to improve skills; it is not that that the players do not properly interpret the game situation, but rather they want to become more skilled at traversing it. Like rereading for non-spontaneous interpretation, gamers want to exhaust every option and explore all possible outcomes. The Steam games' platform encourages this type of repetitive exhaustive play as they offer achievements or trophies that the 'completist' player can gain and then be sure they have

¹⁶ Furlong acknowledges that readers have multiple reasons for rereading various types of texts but focuses upon literary texts reread for pleasure, and she uses comments drawn from 'weblogs' of readers who 'spontaneously reread' (2008: 284)

experienced all the game has to offer. The difference between the completist player and the non-spontaneous interpretative reader is that the reader aims for a 'unity' (2008: 289) whereby they are sure they have understood the text fully, but the player is not seeking to gain greater understanding but instead total conquest. This conquest is in terms of the mechanical interface with the gameworld allowing the player to prove their mastery, unlike the rereader who conceptually builds a storyworld, yet they both return and seek a sense of achievement gained by familiarity and thus a sort of expertise.

Furlong also explains that readers experience a delicate balance between the cognitive effort expended on a text and the reward of effects received; in other words, if a text is difficult to understand and offers no reward for that effort then we will lose interest in it and stop paying attention (2008: 287). This, along with the reader's schema activated by the text, could explain why some readers will expend greater effort with challenging texts (like poetry, for example), if they have previous experiences (i.e. 'poetry schema') which lead them to believe that the effort will be rewarded.

Again, this is seen with videogames, but also with real world games that demand skilful play; the tennis player in the real world or the virtual one will have a more rewarding experience if their kinetic skills are such that

they can win or participate in a challenging game. However, the player has a physical experience whereas the reader has a conceptual one, yet both offer satisfaction. This effort, either cognitive or kinetic, allows us to draw some simple conclusions regarding immersion of flow or transportation type and to see their similarities. In short, an achievable challenge (whether of a gamery or readerly type) facilitates our immersion (whether in a game or a literary text). This notion also flags up the importance of schema refreshment: if our existing schema is reinforced, refreshed, and expanded by a challenge that we deem worthwhile (the effort to effect ratio is satisfying) then we will enjoy the activity, and persist (or 'return', in Ryan's terms). However, if the effort expended to achieve the desired effect is too great or our schema is frustrated because it is not refreshed and expanded then it is likely we will find the activity worthless.

Readerly cognitive effort and the activity of non-spontaneous interpretation associated with literary texts explain why more complex texts are reread, but it does not provide an explanation for the type of rereading more commonly seen in genre texts that may not have the same perceived 'value', in other words, as Furlong asks, why do people reread 'trashy' (2008: 286) literary texts? Furlong is very clear that rereading

much loved texts is desirable to readers because ‘they are seeking a balance between familiarity and novelty; according to their own accounts, they return to a text because they want to experience what they have undergone before.’ (2008: 293). These readers are not expending cognitive effort to gain more understanding or even to have their schema expanded, but instead they wish to re-experience their earlier (or first) encounter with the text because it was pleasurable and satisfying. Furlong likens this type of rereading goal to ‘the effects of pornography (which no one rereads spontaneously in order to undergo unexpected and novel experiences)’ (2008: 295). Furlong calls this type of rereading *non-cumulative rereading*, as the reader is not looking for a new interpretation but rather, they are seeking a repeat of their previous experiences which satisfied them (2008: 296). As we saw above with the similarities of outcome (satisfaction and achievement) between non-spontaneous interpretation of literary discourse and the replaying of a part of a video game to gain skills or understanding, this type of rereading for pleasure could also explain why ‘retro’ games once played on now obsolete gaming systems but now available online are popular. The player of Point and Click game *Thimbleweed Park* (Terrible Toybox 2017) may well be seeking a repeat of their pleasure at playing *The Secret of Monkey Island*

(Lucasarts 1990) as the two were written by the same creator. This desire for repeat experiences in reading or videogames is dependent upon our 'demand' for schema evolution being satisfied - either in its complete replication or by refreshment. Where greater effort is required, we demand greater reward in the resulting effects experienced. Otherwise, we lose interest.

To sum up thus far; if we can identify a readerly type of attention in those experiencing Walking Simulators (rereading for non-spontaneous and or non-cumulative interpretation) then this will suggest that the cognitive process is more readerly and less (if at all) ludic. In short, are users of Walking Simulators more readers or players? The cognitive processes they experience can aid our identification and classification of Walking Simulators.

4.4.3 Deep Attention

To build further on the non-trivial cognitive effort entailed by Furlong's processes of non-spontaneous interpretation, Hayles, similarly, suggests

that literary reading requires ‘deep attention’ which is a focus upon a single object or information stream (Hayles 2007: 187). Deep attention is required when reading literary texts because the single stream of information (reading text and creating an imagined storyworld suggested by the text) requires concentration (like non-spontaneous interpretation). Hayles also points to this necessarily taking more time. Evidence of deep attention should be twofold if we follow both Hayles and Furlong: a single stream of information in evidence onscreen and time spent by the participants interpreting, reinterpreting, re-evaluating, reassessing and then acting upon the information received. This is in contrast to the hyperattention commonly experienced in playing traditional videogames that present multiple streams of information, as described in the previous chapter (3.5.1).

4.4.4 Transportation Immersion

As we saw in chapter 3, games entail a form of flow immersion. In common with game scholars, literary critics and theorists have also long

been concerned with how the virtual worlds of fiction immerse and engage the participant. Gerrig provides a simple metaphor of being 'transported' (in the sense of being conveyed from one place to another) into the fictional world of a literary text (Gerrig 1993: 10-11), perhaps because it is very hard to encode literally, linguistically, what happens when one is immersed in a storyworld of text. A metaphor seems the best way of doing so, in a similar manner to that by which cognitive poetics uses the metaphor of conceptual 'worlds' to explain aspects of the same phenomenon. Gerrig provides a list of elements of literal transportation to explain how experiencing narrative fits into this metaphorical model of transportation:

1. Someone ("the traveller") is transported
2. by some means of transportation
3. as a result of performing certain actions.
4. The traveller goes some distance from his or her world of origin
5. Which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible.
6. The traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.

(Gerrig 1993: 10-11)

Gerrig's model offers us a persuasive explanation for what happens when we read by creating a conceptual blend between the domains of 'reading' and 'travel', sharing some commonalities with the, arguably, more

systematic approach developed through Deictic Shift Theory (Stockwell (2005: 152), Ryan (2015: 10), Herman (2009: 119), Green and Brock (2000: 701), Green et al. (2004: 312), Green (2004: 248)).

Thus, when we read literary texts, we are ‘transported’ (we ‘travel’) to the place, time, and events of the described storyworld, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, through a process of conceptual world-building based on schema. Green (2004) points out that transportation is psychologically similar to flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), because it pushes the real world aside while the individual is engrossed in their activity (Green 2004: 248). However, as established in the previous chapter on games, flow immersion, while related, is not the same as transportation because flow is brought about via repetitive physical interaction, whereas transportation achieves the same state of absorption or engrossment via intellectual activation of the imagination. Flow immersion can be experienced in both the real world (rock climbers, surgeons, athletes, and so on) and the virtual world (players of videogames) because flow demands our kinetic engagement as we focus upon the repetitive physical reactions demanded by the various activities, and it is through this repetition and focus that we become immersed and non-attendant to other stimuli around us. What we will henceforth term **transportation**

immersion can only be achieved within the world of our imagination, and is brought about by our engagement with linguistic, visual or aural stimulation demanding cognitive effort rather than kinetic types of engagement. This is a crucial distinction between interaction with ludic and literary artefacts.

Nell (1988) describes transportation as being an element of reading for pleasure, *ludic reading*, which he categorises as an aspect of play. Reading (here an encompassing term that includes listening and viewing, essentially an opportunity to access a storyworld, (Gerrig 1993: 7) for pleasure is of the same order as playing a videogame, that is a desire to play, to experience an 'interlude in our daily lives' (Huizinga 1938: 9).

However, reading is a cognitive activity that (generally) requires us to be physically still, and playing a videogame is a cognitive *and* physical activity requiring our active physical participation. **Flow immersion**, therefore, will be the term adopted here to describe this interlude while we are engaged in and engrossed by physical activities, and **transportation immersion** for those offering a narrative imaginative experience, entailing the conceptual building of a storyworld.

Transportation, as systematised by Gerrig, provides us with the basis of our model for anatomising player-reader interaction with games and

literary texts, but it is to Ryan (2015: 85-114) that we need to turn to find a more detailed and precise model of transportation immersion categories: spatial, spatio-temporal, temporal, and emotional.

Ryan describes spatial immersion as a sense of place and linked to the use of a number of literary devices: deictic language, second-person address (Ryan 2015: 87), a character-focalised narration, the use of proper names, and a detailing of reality as close as possible with representation or mimesis that language affords (Ryan 2015: 91). Prose fiction makes use of direct or free indirect discourse as a mimetic representation of real-life discourse but with obvious conventions and limitations (real speech, for example, contains pauses, repetition, grammatical errors, and so on (Leech and Short 2007: 130), real speech also offers intonation, accent, aspects of prosody, and so on which can be conveyed in a limited form in orthographic conventions of different typefaces (Leech and Short 2007: 256). Spatio-temporal immersion occurs when the 'imaginative distance between the position of the narrator and addressee and the timed place of the narrative events...is reduced to near zero' (Ryan 2015: 93). This is a familiar device as many novels begin with descriptions of the setting and then focusing in on the heroine. Ryan's method of analysis is situated within the storyworld and both the reader's and author's conception of

this imaginary space. This is common with many literary texts (especially prose fiction), which often open with descriptions of setting, main characters and so on.

Ryan aligns temporal immersion with suspense, which is common across text genres and particularly in popular genre fiction where a suspenseful plot will keep a reader turning the pages. Ryan explains that this phenomenon is about the author playing with readers' anticipation and what they think will happen next. She describes it as falling into four categories: 'what' suspense (what happens next), 'how' or 'why' suspense (how or why did the victim die), 'who' suspense (who was responsible), and a 'meta' suspense (how will this be solved in 300 pages) (Ryan 2015: 102-105). Ryan's final category of transportation immersion is *emotional*, which, she suggests, has three aspects: subjective reactions to characters and their behaviour, empathetic emotions felt for the characters, and emotions felt for oneself like fear, disgust, or arousal (Ryan 2015: 108). It must be noted that despite Ryan's book *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015) taking in some aspects of videogames (particularly when examining interactivity), her immersion theory is restricted to 'text as world' (2015: 61), and she makes the point that 'when VR theorists attempt to describe the phenomenon of immersion in a virtual world, the metaphor that

imposes itself with the greatest insistence is the reading experience' (2015: 61).

We will see in the case studies (chapters 7,8,9) that this sub-division of transportation types that Ryan offers enables a more nuanced understanding of how Walking Simulators immerse those player/readers who have shared their thoughts on the Steam forums. Greater understanding of the transportation immersion experienced in different Walking Simulator titles will then allow us to draw direct comparisons to shared elements of literary texts.

4.4.5 Deictic Shift Theory (Literary)

We saw in Chapter 3 that ludic deictic shifts involve being ‘pushed’ into a virtual world as part of the process of playing a videogame and how this navigation from our real world to a gameworld is aided by the technological surroundings presented onscreen. In contrast, the more passive literary deictic shift involves a cognitive movement of transportation (or push) from the actual into a storyworld (Stockwell 2005: 41) created by positional words that locate the reader, but also the descriptive locators that allow the reader to construct the setting for the storyworld. While Stockwell’s work goes into considerable detail about the use of language and positioning of the reader with literary texts, what is useful in the context of this thesis is the notion of ‘implied reader’ (Stockwell 2005: 47); in other words, in prose fiction we are unable to take on the role of a character, but instead we are the author’s audience, or to whom the author writes the text inasmuch as the author believes the implied reader shares and understands the world being created. This is key because, by comparison, in a videogame we are actors or enactors of the onscreen events; in same way that a literary text is heteronomous and does not exist for us until we read it and construct it in our imagination, a

videogame does not work unless we take part and enact appropriate (kinetic) behaviours which enable the game to reach its conclusion. Both games and stories require our involvement and immersion, but like flow and transportation, they are different: readers experience a shift in deixis, and gamers a shift in attention.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

It will bear restating at this point that the aim of this thesis is to define the Walking Simulator genre and identify how it immerses participants, and whether the immersion experienced is that of a readerly transportation immersion type, as defined by Gerrig (1993) and Ryan (2015), or a gamerly flow immersion type, as defined by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2009). Accordingly, as was proposed in the introduction, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that the Walking Simulator can be viewed as a digital literary storytelling artefact. This form has not been addressed in any depth by the existing literature which largely falls into three broad areas: this new storytelling genre is experimental digital literature; these are artistic artefacts; and this new form challenges existing videogame culture. So far no definition of a Walking Simulator situating it firmly within a literary or videogame context has been produced.

Ensslin's work (particularly 2014,2015,2016) favours a literary approach which we will look at in some detail within this chapter. Ensslin calls the space between game and literature 'literary gaming', also the title of her 2014 book which looks at early Walking Simulator *The Path* as a case study. Ensslin's work is of particular note both here and throughout this thesis as her 2014 book provided an initial basis for the methodology, but as we will see in this chapter, it was a collaborative article published in 2018 with Bell, Van Der Bom, and Smith on the subject of immersion in digital fiction that provided a necessary link and suggested approach for looking at Walking Simulators in a similar fashion to fiction. It is not only Ensslin that favours a literary approach when examining Walking Simulators, Barnard (2015), while not explicitly referencing Walking Simulators, does use *Dear Esther* as an example, and suggests that videogames 'can be read and understood as falling into some sort of category of literature' (2015: 87). My own earlier research paper also addressed *Dear Esther* as a literary artefact and examined how the use of second person address aided creation of multiple storyworlds for the audience (Colthup 2018). Likewise, Reynolds draws direct parallels with the writing of Marguerite Duras (Reynolds 2014: 49) where it is used in Tale of Tales Walking Simulator game, *Bientôt l'été* (Harvey 2013). Carter

(2016) describes *Dear Esther* as ‘virtual literature’ which ‘reframes’ current notions of the literary and Fest in the same year describes *The Stanley Parable* as being a logical development from postmodern literature (Fest 2016), likewise Koenitz calls Walking Simulators ‘narrative avant garde’ in his 2017 article. Heron (2015) describes them as ‘empathy games’, and as such crossing over between game and literature as the latter has traditionally been seen as encouraging empathy among its audiences.

O’Sullivan makes a very clear case for considering Walking Simulators, taking *Dear Esther* as a case study, as an art form if viewed as part of the digital sublime. O’Sullivan discusses beyond visual concerns of beauty and nature which feature heavily in *Dear Esther* and focuses upon the poetic, as he points out,

[T]he island [of *Dear Esther*] may be computationally small, but for its inhabitants, its limits seem endless. The illusion and power of the digital sublime is that knowing the entire contents of such limited spaces seems as though it is a task that would take a lifetime to achieve. (O’Sullivan 2017: 321)

Just as Art allows us to ‘see’ beyond the narrow confines of our world and opinions, so might Walking Simulators like *Dear Esther*. Carbo-Mascarell suggests in her 2016 conference paper that Walking Simulators find their roots in the Romantic movement which, Carbo-Mascarell points out, employed walking to aid aesthetic practice. This link with real life walking

and art is also put forward by Bozdog and Galloway who have written about their Incholm Project (2017) set in Scotland, that recreates some of the environmental elements of *Dear Esther* as an immersive performance. Mitchell et al (2017) undertook an empirical study which looks at three possible Walking Simulator titles, *The Graveyard*, *Thirty Flights of Loving*, and *The Stanley Parable*. They refer to these titles as Art games and their study focused upon how they defamiliarised gaming for participants, which in turn provides further evidence of the usefulness of applying schema theory to any analysis of Walking Simulators and the experiences of participants, as mentioned earlier.

Some scholars see Walking Simulators as a challenge to existing culture surrounding gaming. Keogh explained in his 2015 conference paper for DiGRA that instead of offering a masculine ‘mastery and control’ experience as commonly seen in videogames, Walking Simulators, *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* in particular, have an integrated and cooperative relationship of text and experience (Keogh 2015: 9). Keogh points out that this type of experience presents a challenge to ‘the masculinist dominance of the commercial video game industry’ (ibid). Pavlounis likewise points to *Gone Home* as an example of ‘one of the few video games dealing explicitly with issues of diversity and sexuality to receive mainstream

attention and accolades.’ (Pavlounis 2016: 581). *Gone Home* is, as Pavlounis puts it, not a ‘coming of age story’ as suggested by the mainstream media, but a ‘coming out story’ (2016: 580), and as such is, as Keogh had said in 2015, a challenge to the current cultural hegemony of masculinity in videogames. To add to this aspect of challenging the cultural hegemony, Kagan, says that the Walking Simulator ‘subverts hypermasculine play’ (Kagen 2018) by foregrounding passivity in their lack of agency - participants cannot run, kill, or in any way act violently, or indeed, meaningfully with their surroundings, instead one must wander, listen or read, and consider the narrative unfolding onscreen, as we shall see in the case studies. Kagen explains this simply as ‘if hyper masculinity demands activity and accomplishment, then walking simulators are born as a non-hypermasculine game genre’ (Kagen 2018), and as such they challenge traditional expectations of videogames as well as the boundaries of what game, text, and storytelling experiences might be in the future.

This thesis, in seeking fill this lacuna by defining this new form, suggests that Walking Simulators are digital literary storytelling artefacts because they have more literary than ludic features, and the main reason for having previously classified them as videogames is because the shared technical mediality through which Walking Simulators are encountered.

Ensslin's ludostylistic framework, introduced in chapter 3, is re-evaluated in this chapter in the light of the specifics of the Walking Simulator.

Some elements of the framework, as we will see, can be discarded while others can be employed usefully in the analysis and categorisation of this new form. Using Ensslin's framework as a basis, we can then construct a Walking Simulator stylistic framework that synthesises elements of the definitions of gameworld and storyworld, and the cognitive approaches thus far discussed. Following this identification of useful elements to be examined we can turn to data selection, Gamer forums, and ethical issues before moving onto the next chapter where the generic features of Walking Simulators.

5.2 Ludostylistics Repurposed

We saw in chapter 3 that Ensslin's functional ludostylistics (Ensslin, 2014: 53-54) provides a framework for fusing 'game' and literary texts (Ensslin, 2014: 5), to map these 'hybrid' texts across a spectrum or cline. The framework encompasses ludology elements (rules and types of games, gameworld, and agency), and ludonarratology (storyworld, narrativity, and external narrativity found in gamer forums). It will be useful now to

briefly explore and define each of these elements in turn.

5.2.1 Ludology

Ensslin's first aspect of Ludology in Literary Games is Rules and Walking Simulator rules are simple but threefold: those dictating parameters within the gameworld; those defining the narrative structure; and those particular to the Walking Simulator such as the absence of win/lose conditions (2014: 52). These three map onto Ensslin's Functional Ludostylistics in this way:

| Functional Ludostylistics | Walking Simulator Rules |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Gameplay | Gameworld parameters |
| Game architecture | Narrative structure |
| Victory and termination conditions | WS specific rules - lack of win/lose conditions |

Table 2: How Walking Simulators map onto Functional Ludostylistics

Other ludology aspects are of minimal concern to Walking Simulators:

| Functional Ludostylistics | Walking Simulators |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Risks and challenges | Not offered as part of the participatory game, instead there may be elements of risk or challenge within the story but participants can only observe in a readerly rather than playerly fashion. |
| Feedback | Minimal, and again concerned with the unfolding narrative where the participant gains access to different gameworld areas to reveal more of the story. |
| Agency | Restricted to spatial agency only. |

| | |
|------------|-------------------|
| Game genre | Walking Simulator |
|------------|-------------------|

Table 3: Other aspects of Functional Ludostylistics that are of lesser importance to Walking Simulators

Risks and challenges to the player are not part of Walking Simulators as they are not games in the sense that explains (Caillois 1961 trans.: 134-5). Likewise, feedback and agency, intrinsic parts of gameplay, are minimal in Walking Simulators and generally the narrative can be experienced without barrier or penalties, with the only reward is the revealing of the plot.

The final aspect within Ludology that Ensslin deals with is Types of Play. Evidence of true play based upon Huizinga and Caillois's classifications needs to be established within the case studies. Thus, a Walking Simulator stylistic framework needs to address the following aspects drawn from Ensslin's ludology component Functional Ludostylistics: rules; gameplay; game architecture; victory and termination conditions; types of play.

5.2.2 Ludonarratology

Ludonarratology is central to the examination and analysis of Walking Simulators as this thesis hypothesises that they are storytelling artefacts that sit within a liminal space between literary and ludic domains.

Functional Ludostylistics suggest three aspects of ludonarratology: in-game narrative; game-story relationship; external narrativity. Key here is the external narrativity as this addresses the third part of the research question of this thesis: examining the experiences of readers/players of Walking Simulators as reported publicly within the Steam gaming platform's forums. It is here, within this external narrativity, that we will find data enabling further clarification of the Walking Simulator's status as either a videogame or digital storytelling artefact based upon participant experiences.

5.2.3 Ludosemiotics

Ensslin's Functional Ludostylistics features ludosemiotics as the third of

four key components (2014: 52-53) with which to analyse literary games; however, this aspect is not dealt with in any great detail within this thesis because it is more concerned with the immersive experiences of the participants rather than an analysis of the ludosemiotic content of each title - in other words, how the player experience is activated by these ludosemiotic features is central to this thesis rather than these features themselves. These aspects are: interface design; verbal language; text and discourse; multimodality; procedural rhetoric - this last aspect being redundant as Walking Simulators are largely prose fiction with the only exception being *That Dragon, Cancer* which is based upon a true story of a family's experience of losing their child to cancer but includes a great deal of fantasy as part of the emotional narrative.

Thus, each of the aspects featuring within ludosemiotics is dealt with briefly within the descriptions and identification of each case study title, with more focus upon how or if these appear within participant feedback.

5.2.4 Mediality

Beyond establishing the commonality between videogames and Walking

Similar to PC or console, keyboard, mouse, controller, there is little to be gained from closely analysing the mediality of Walking Simulators currently. However, this shared mediality may play a part in our understanding of the reactions of some participants of Walking Simulators because the experience is gained via the same materiality as a videogame yet does not offer challenge, victory, mastery, or thrill which are central to traditional videogames. It may be that it is possible to identify a dissonance between participants' reported experiences when compared to their anticipated or expected experiences which would suggest an inconsistency in their schema. In other words, if a participant comes to a Walking Simulator with its attendant mediality that suggests a videogame because it is on a console or PC gaming platform, requires a mouse, keyboard, controller, and so on, yet what the participant gets is an experience that does not offer anything similar to a videogame in terms of those gamerly elements, then they are going to be dissatisfied.

5.3 Walking Simulator Stylistics

Synthesising Ensslin's Functional Ludostylistics with elements established

within chapters 3 and 4, we can set out a proposed Walking Simulator Stylistics framework which analyses two main components: the Walking Simulator as artefact and the cognitive experience of participants:

| Walking Simulator Component | Aspect |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Gameworld | Gameworld parameters |
| Storyworld | Narrative structure Point of view |

| Cognitive Component | Aspect | Expected Evidence |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Attention Type | Deep Attention | Long durations of interaction |
| Transportation Immersion | Spatial | Discussion of onscreen verisimilitude |
| | Spatio-temporal | Discussion of identification with characters |
| | Temporal | Long durations of interaction |
| | Emotional: Subjective Empathetic Emotions for oneself | Discussion of feelings or opinions |
| Deictic Shift Type | Active embodied <i>ludic</i> shift | Use of first person to recount their experience within the gameworld |
| | Semi-passive or passive <i>literary</i> shift | Use of third person to recount the events that happen to the character |
| Schema Activation | Refreshment and expansion | Discussion or assertion that Walking Simulators are a type of videogame, or rejection of any refreshment |
| | To aid immersion and engagement | Memories evoked and discussed |

| | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Revisiting/Rereading | Non-spontaneous interpretation | Discussion of revisiting to understand the story |
| | | Discussion of different readings of the story to arrive at a unified understanding |
| | Non-cumulative rereading | Discussion of revisiting for the pleasure of the experience within the gameworld or to revisit the storyworld without additional or new interpretation |

Table 4 - Walking Simulator Stylistics Framework

This framework takes key aspects from Ensslin’s functional ludostylistics; ludology: rules, and game architecture; ludonarratology: in-game narrative, external narrativity (how gamers on the Steam forums report their experiences). It does not take into account mediality as set out in Ensslin’s model because these are largely identical among Walking Simulators, as outlined in chapter 3. Likewise, as mentioned, ludosemiotics from Ensslin’s model has been excluded for the purposes of this thesis. The aspects of ludosemiotics that Ensslin describes: interface design, verbal language, text and discourse, procedural rhetoric, and multimodality, are all rich areas of investigation when analysing the content of individual Walking Simulator titles, but this thesis is concerned with establishing a working definition of this new genre and focusing upon how these titles give rise to transportation immersion as found in participant feedback on Steam forums. Thus, the necessary limitations and boundaries of this thesis preclude close examination of

ludosemiotics as they appear in Walking Simulators.

5.4 Data Selection Criteria

The Walking Simulators that were selected for the case studies and wider examination to arrive at robust defining criteria for this new genre are all available on the Steam PC platform, carry the Walking Simulator tag, and have all been nominated or won established videogame awards.

The table below shows the 13 titles, nine of which have been award winners since their release, with case study, *Firewatch* being the most successful so far. The remaining four titles (*The Graveyard*, *The Path*, *The Novelist*, and *The Beginner's Guide*) have all been nominated for awards but did not win. It is interesting to note that despite some audience confusion or outright dislike of the form (as mentioned in chapter 2), critics and industry members alike are praising these titles as is evident from the nominations and awards.

| Year of release | Title | Developer | Award Year | Awarding Body | Category |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| 2008 | The Graveyard | Tale of Tales | 2009 (Nomination) | Independent Games Festival | Innovation |
| 2009 | The Path | Tale of Tales | 2008 (Nomination) | Independent Games Festival | Excellence in Visual Arts |
| | | | 2010 | hóPLAY International Video Game Festival | Best Sound |
| | | | 2010 | hóPLAY International Video Game Festival | Best Design |
| 2012 | Dear Esther | The Chinese Room | 2012 | Independent Games Festival | Excellence in Visual Art |
| 2013 | Gone Home | The Fullbright Company | 2014 | Bafta | Debut Game |
| | | | 2013 | VGX | Best Independent Game |
| | | | 2013 | Game Developers Choice Awards | Best Debut |
| 2013 | The Stanley Parable | Galactic Cafe | 2014 | Independent Games Festival | Audience Award |
| 2013 | The Novelist | Orthogonal Games | 2014 (Nomination) | DICE | Outstanding Achievement in Story |
| | | | 2014 (Nomination) | SXSW | Gamers Voice Award |
| 2014 | The Vanishing of Ethan Carter | The Astronauts | 2015 | Bafta | Game Innovation |
| 2015 | Everybody's Gone to the Rapture | The Chinese Room | 2016 | Bafta | Audio Achievement |
| | | | 2016 | Bafta | Music |
| 2015 | The Beginner's Guide | Galactic Cafe | 2016 (Nominated) | Game Developers Choice Awards | Innovation |
| | | | 2016 (Nominated) | Game Developers Choice Awards | Best Narrative |
| | | | 2016 (Nominated) | Independent Games Festival | Excellence in Narrative |
| | | | 2016 (Nominated) | Independent Games Festival | Nuovo Award for Innovation |
| 2016 | Firewatch | Campo Santo | 2017 | Bafta | Debut Game |
| | | | 2017 | Bafta | Performer |
| | | | 2016 | Game Developers Choice Awards | Best Debut |
| | | | 2016 | Game Developers Choice Awards | Best Narrative |
| | | | 2016 | Golden Joystick Awards | Best Indie Game |
| 2016 | That Dragon, Cancer | Numinous Games | 2017 | Bafta | Game Innovation |
| | | | 2016 | Video Games Awards | Games for Impact |
| 2016 | Virginia | Variable State | 2017 | Bafta | Music |
| 2017 | What Remains of Edith Finch | Giant Sparrow | 2018 | Bafta | Best Game |
| | | | 2017 | Video Games Awards | Best Narrative |
| | | | 2017 | Game Developers Choice Awards | Best Narrative |

Figure 8: Walking Simulator Awards

The first recognisable Walking Simulator arrived in 2008, *The Graveyard* from Tale of Tales. Since 2008 and until 2018 approximately 13 Walking Simulators have been released, those listed above. The rider here, ‘approximately’, is included because there are other titles which have claimed to be Walking Simulators and have not been included in the representative sample because they have not met the criteria of being tagged by Steam as a Walking Simulator, or they feature one of Caillois’s game classifications (agon, alea, mimicry, or ilinx) and are thus a true videogame. The examples chosen for the case studies - *Dear Esther*, *Firewatch*, and *The Novelist* are representative of the varied nature of this new genre as it begins to develop.

5.5 Ethics and Data Selection Criteria

The case studies each draw upon participant responses recorded online within the Steam platform community discussion pages. It should be noted that the Steam gaming platform is a commercial enterprise and as such the forum users have paid for their access to the titles. This does, therefore, present a limited focus upon those who are able to access these titles and as such tacitly embraces a neoliberal agenda. This is a point revisited in Chapter 10.4 The Limitations of this thesis.

It is also worth noting here that while the general term 'participants' is often used, 'posters' is more reflective of the position of those using the forums on Steam. 'Participants' is used throughout this thesis as something of a 'halfway house' to avoid labelling users of Walking Simulators either 'players' or 'readers'. However, in the following chapters where the focus is upon comments posted by forum users, the term 'posters' or 'users' will be broadly used to as none of them consented to participation in my study, but as they did choose to experience the titles within the case studies, at times the term 'participant' is returned to. This

problematic nomenclature remains unresolved and is part of the wider issues surrounding Walking Simulators.

The users who have posted their responses on the Steam forums are self-selecting, and although these posts are entirely public and searchable via Google and other search engines, it is appropriate to adopt a similar stance to that of Mackenzie in their work on Mumsnet forums (Mackenzie 2017). Mackenzie selected fifty threads with common themes, and from that two threads that displayed contrasts in style to enable microlinguistic and discursive analysis on the posters' gendered identities (Mackenzie 2017: 4). The analysis of poster responses to the case study Walking Simulators searches for descriptive comments that suggest immersion. Mackenzie suggests that users may believe their posts to be within a semi-private space akin to a pub conversation with friends and, as such, if researchers 'eavesdrop' without making themselves known this can be problematic. Mackenzie writes:

[The] complex nature of privacy online, especially within a forum that declares itself to be "public", thus raising an ethical issue that is of interest, concern and debate for many internet users and researchers (Mackenzie 2017: 1)

However, Mumsnet deals with personal problems and experiences of parents, mothers in particular as implied by its name. The Steam community forum is like that of Mumsnet inasmuch as members sign up

by providing email details but adopt pseudonyms to anonymise themselves. The comments posted to Steam are in response to the games each poster has experienced and as such less likely to present a similar complexity concerning privacy that Mumsnet does.

The Steam community forum guidelines state that no personal identifying details can be used within the forums:

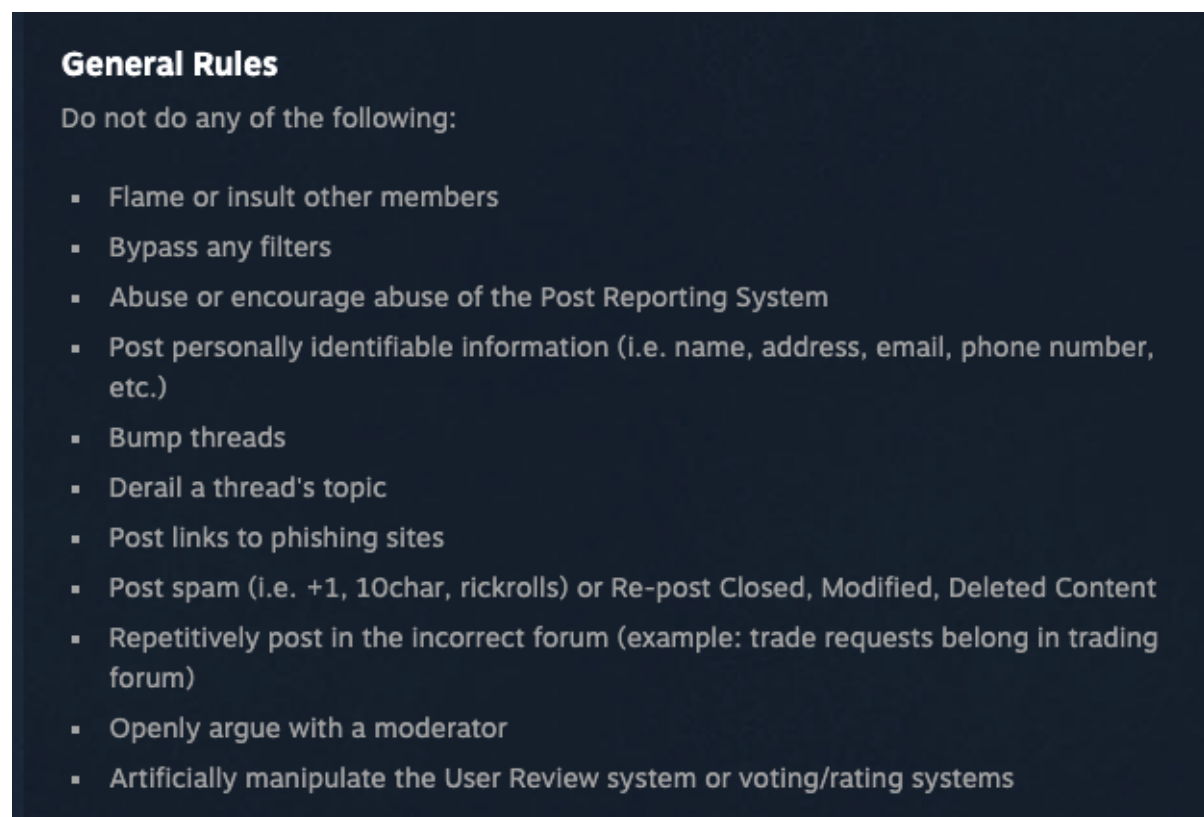


Figure 9: Steam Forum Rules (Platform 2017)

The suggestions of Mackenzie on using internet discussions have been

largely followed here, but a broader and more generalised approach has been adopted. Mackenzie uses a reflexive-linguistic approach to internet research ethics and classifies Mumsnet as a type of ‘participatory culture’ that Henry Jenkins identified (2010). The Steam forums can likewise be considered similarly because both feature a shared space for users to have what Jenkins calls a ‘collective enterprise which shapes the experience of individual participants’ (2010). In other words, forums like Steam and Mumsnet allow users to share their experiences of gaming or parenting respectively, and in turn perhaps learn additional skills or otherwise benefit from the experiences of others. While Mumsnet, Mackenzie points out, is largely used by female, heterosexual, middle-class parents (Mackenzie 2017: 4), Steam’s demographics are harder to identify. However, UKIE (UK Interactive Entertainment) and Newzoo suggest that 32.4 million people in the UK are gamers (Ukie 2018), and Steam had 18.5 million users in October 2018, with only 3% from the UK, suggesting that approximately half a million Steam users are in the UK. That said, it is not always easy to identify UK users of the Steam forums and as such nationality has not been considered. The Steam forums looked at are those written in English and could therefore be users from anywhere in the world.

It will be useful now to go into Mackenzie's 'reflexive-linguistic' approach (2017: 5) in more detail. It has five different methods: systematic observation, memo writing, adapting a poster stance, engagement with posters and gatekeepers, and linguistic analysis. Mackenzie states that for internet researchers these methods may not be used in a chronological order, or indeed not all methods may be required, and on this suggestion, I have only used linguistic analysis. Mackenzie's research examined, in part, the ways Mumsnet users achieved a degree of privacy (2017: 7), but my focus is not on individual users as such but upon the responses to the three case study titles. Internet research ethics remains under-researched (Mackenzie (2017), Curwood et al. (2019)), it is of particular importance when examining forums dealing with personal details such as relationships, health, and gender, and sexuality, it is of lesser concern to gaming forums like Steam because users are less likely to share personal details or narratives. As such Steam forums inhabit a space closer to that of reviewers found on Amazon or Goodreads. Dimitrov et al. (2015) undertakes a linguistic analysis of users of Amazon compared to Goodreads and looked at language specific to each platform, but they do not appear to have addressed the ethical issue of analysing published reviews without consulting the authors first, but unlike Mumsnet, but in

common with Steam, users are writing about their responses to a narrative, whether a novel or a Walking Simulator, and as such it is less likely to elicit deeply personal or identifiable information. Curwood et al. (2019) discuss online literacy research but they focused upon individuals and following them across digital platforms whereas my research subjects are the digital artefacts, Walking Simulators, and not the human posters. As such, as outlined above, the relationship of posters with one another is not that of a close-knit community as it might be across social media or sites like Mumsnet, and instead posts are less self-reflecting, intimate, or personal, and instead more review like and aimed at an unknown audience. Thus, Steam forum posts have been treated like critical articles appearing on gaming websites.

It should also be noted that although I have my own Steam account (username heidiann205) and access to a household Steam account (username alfaholic) neither of these accounts have any posts on the discussion forums for the three case studies.

5.6 Gamer Forums - the 21st Literary Salon?

For centuries people have gathered together first to read or be read to, then to discuss books with groups by the 17th Century gathering to discuss not just books but ‘literature, politics or culture’ (Sedo 2011: 3). The digital revolution of the internet has not supplanted groups meeting in the real world to discuss books and more, but instead thousands of reading groups continue to thrive in the UK.¹⁷ The website Goodreads which is a recommendation and review site had over 90 million registered users as at July 2019 (Statista 2020a), and they have many active community forums where individuals share opinions. Reading continues to be both a solitary and participatory activity where we tend to read alone but come together to share our thoughts on the text; likewise, we can see parallels in experiencing videogames, and Walking Simulators. This is an interesting development, and an important plank of support for this thesis’s central contention about the ‘literariness’ of Walking Simulators.

The Steam gaming platform reported over 20 million users in March 2020 (Statista 2020b) which is considerably less than Goodreads but only accounts for those playing videogames on PCs (the PlayStation Network

¹⁷ The Reading Agency suggest that there are over 10,000 groups connected to local libraries, but there are many more unregistered and ad hoc groups across the UK.

report 113 million users, and Microsoft's Xbox Live report over 90 million users in 2020 (Statista 2020). What is interesting for the purposes of this thesis is the interaction happening on gaming forums, and in particular the Steam forums as these have provided the data used to address the questions about cognitive engagement and interactivity experienced by participants of Walking Simulators. These forums, as we will see in the case studies, offer more than a virtual space for posters to ask questions, gain hints and tips, or to complain about poor gaming experiences. Participants recount deeply affecting and intimate experiences they have had while exploring the virtual worlds of *Dear Esther*, *Firewatch*, and *The Novelist*, as well as other titles also tagged as Walking Simulators.

Analysing the comments found in these Steam poster comments is best approached using a similar methodology as that commonly used for Reader Response analysis. Bell, Ensslin, et al offer a clear and systematic analysis method for digital literature, which they point out had previously been lacking within theories of immersion (Bell et al. 2018: 4), thus this method is entirely appropriate for this thesis. They offer a reader response study, drawn from literary studies and building upon previous research within digital fiction:

[W]e propose a “symbiotic” (Gavins & Stockwell 2012) cognitive poetic

approach to immersion in digital fiction, which combines text-driven analysis with theories of cognition and empirical research. (Bell et al 2018: 5)

The particular aspect of the cognitive poetic approach taken here is a further development of Deictic Shift Theory to allow it to take into account digital media (Bell et al 2018: 2); I have further extended this to also account for videogames (in chapter 3, section 3.5.3). In the same way that Bell et al have combined text analysis with cognition theories and empirical research in a 'symbiotic' approach, this thesis combines examination of the artefacts themselves with cognitive approaches of attention, immersion, deictic shift, schema, and rereading or replaying, and then empirical research with data drawn from the Steam forums.

Bell et al recommend using Reader Response methods for finding out how immersion is experienced in digital fiction. Whiteley and Canning point out in their 2017 article that examining the reader's response to a text is 'inescapable' because the text itself is only brought into being by the reader (Whiteley and Canning 2017: 72). Whiteley and Canning have established the use of Reader Response studies, particularly in relation to literary stylistics, but it is possible to use this approach here because videogames (and similarly Walking Simulators as they use the same technical medium) do not come into being until the player interacts with it.

Bell et al took a qualitative approach and used reader groups who had all experienced the same pieces of digital literature and a ‘semi-naturalistic’ session of conversations (Bell et al. 2018: 10) were carried out with a researcher facilitating discussion the groups. By adapting their recommendations of Reader Research methods to Reader Observation by using Steam forum posts which observed rather than elicited the responses, this thesis may avoid Labov’s Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972) which Bell et al point to as a drawback to their research. The use of Steam forums is not without its own drawbacks as it will be reflective of how the posters wish to project themselves online (Boyd and Heer 2006) but this is also true of reader response questionnaires where one may be less than truthful about the books read or genre preferences to project a particular identity (Mason 2019: 138). However, despite drawbacks within this methodology some interesting insights are gained, as we will see over the next few chapters.

The comments made by posters within the case studies often form a new personal narrative as they retell their experiences. Psychologist Donald Polkinghorn said that ‘narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions’ (Polkinghorne 1988: 11), and he goes on to say that it is narrative

and stories that give meaning to human existence. We will see, therefore, that the opportunity to share one's experience of a storyworld and experience onscreen is an important technological development that arises from digital narrative experiences like that of the Walking Simulator and has much in common with the experience of literary reading.

It must be noted that while some effort has been made to delineate the forum comments into the various cognitive elements, often the responses overlap (attention type and rereading, for example) where this happens the comments appear in the first cognitive element section to avoid repetition. Attention, immersion, deictic shift, schema, and revisiting or rereading are all elements of cognitive interaction and as such they necessarily overlap, in addition to this, the comments are not in response to a researcher asking directed questions that may elicit answers more easily coded and organised.

Chapter 6 Investigating the Walking Simulator

6.1 Introduction

Having identified the data for use within this and the following case study chapters, we can now begin the work of investigating, anatomising and defining this new genre. In chapters 3 and 4 we examined how videogames and shared literary elements might prove useful for classification of Walking Simulators, and we will turn to these first. We will then turn our attention to the cognitive approaches drawn from both videogames and reading literary texts and here our purpose is twofold: we will be able to hypothesise about the likely domain that the Walking Simulator can be most firmly located within, and we will also be able to identify useful elements that can be used to further explore and confirm or disprove our hypothesis in the Steam gamer forums which we turn to in the next three chapters.

6.2 The Walking Simulator as Game

In chapter 3 we examined what defines a game and the definition provided by Salen and Zimmerman was used:

A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 80)

From this a number of useful elements were identified that we can now use to locate Walking Simulators within this paradigm: engagement (attention and immersion), artificial conflict (types of games), and rules.

In short, can Walking Simulators be classified as 'games' according to this set of parameters? How does the gameworld of the Walking Simulator facilitate interaction on the part of the player-reader? To what extent does the player-reader experience agency as part of this interaction with the gameworld?

6.2.1 What type of game is the Walking Simulator?

Is it possible to locate Walking Simulators within the domain of games using Caillois's definitions of game types: *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*?

To briefly recap: agon is competition; alea is chance; mimicry is make-believe; andilinx is physical thrill. Iilinx was ruled out in Chapter 3 as there is no physical thrill offered with many videogames. With mimicry while Walking Simulators are not 'true' simulations and bear the name because it has been adopted after repeated reference in the popular media to this genre being nothing more than a make-believe walk, there is a close resemblance to both the real world and many First-Person shooter type videogames. Indeed, an article in the Guardian newspaper in 2020 by academic Melissa Kagan suggested that the virtual walk in nature offered by titles such as *Firewatch*, and *Everybody's gone to the Rapture* could provide an alternative to the real world (Kagan 2020). This true mimicry of 3D games like First-Person shooters that is seen in Walking Simulators could account for the misunderstanding seen among gamer communities who insist that they are not games. Walking Simulators, in many cases, look exactly like well-known mainstream videogames, yet they do not behave like them.

There is a limited element of chance in some Walking Simulators. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) has four scripts, each slightly different and offering more aspects of the overall story. Which script is presented at the beginning and then at the following way-points is randomised in

turn encouraging revisiting or replaying the experience. This is not true alea as evident in, say, gambling games; there is no quantifiable reward other than discovering more of the story, and as such this is more akin to a branching narrative in a literary text.

Walking Simulators do not feature *agon* which is characterised by a binary win/lose outcome. Some Walking Simulators have *ludic* features, in the form of incidental puzzles or other mini-games. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017) and *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), each have small ludic challenges, none of which are particularly difficult or demand highly sophisticated fine motor skills. In *Ethan Carter* we are asked to uncover fragments of the narrative within each section (or chapter), this is generally done by collecting or identifying objects which then allows us to see flashbacks of the events (in each case a murder) and put them into the correct order of events. This is undoubtedly game-like, or ludic, as it presents a puzzle that we must solve and, if we leave this puzzle unresolved, we cannot move on with the narrative to finally uncover what happened to Ethan. Likewise, in *Edith Finch* each chapter presents various ludic challenges that again keep us engaged as well as providing more of the narrative. Likewise, in *Gone Home* we must solve some simple

puzzles, such as finding the number code for a safe so we can open it and read medical notes which allude to further motivations for character behaviour. *Gone Home* begins with a simple puzzle whereby to get into the house the key has to be discovered, and while this is not difficult or particularly demanding, it does provide a form of ludic interactivity which perhaps aids immersion, or at least simple engagement. At this point we have to say 'perhaps' because this is yet to be established beyond anecdotal evidence from forums or writers and critics' own experiences of these puzzles.

We can say that Walking Simulators often (but not always) exhibit ludic behaviours with some titles displaying more of these interludes, and thus being closer to our commonly accepted concept of a videogame, and other titles display little or no ludic interludes. Walking Simulators do not feature any form of scoring as we might see in a sports-type game or a First-Person Shooter (FPS) game; however, most titles appearing on gaming platforms do have accompanying achievements or trophies that can be 'won' as players might in an FPS. Often, for Walking Simulators these achievements are as simple as reaching the end of the story, but these achievements have been added by the gaming platform and are not intrinsic parts of the gameworld. Some achievements are in the spirit of

the title, as seen in the achievements for *The Stanley Parable*, for example, which has one called 'Go Outside' and can (in theory) only be gained after not playing the title for five years, but it can also be achieved by altering the clock and date in the PC or game console's settings and thereby cheating to get the trophy. It is interesting that despite offering no agon or true challenge within the Walking Simulator itself we still feel the need to 'gamify' them to produce a challenge achieved through completion. We can see something of a parallel in reading books whereby individuals signed up to the website *Goodreads* can take part in their annual reading challenge where each poster sets their own target of books to complete. Throughout the year the website and accompanying app keeps track of readers' progress and posters can compare themselves to their online friends also taking part in the challenge. There are also simple apps that allow readers to keep track of their reading progress within physical copies of books in a similar way that users of eReaders are able to view the percentage read and time necessary to complete. Likewise, there are websites that allow us to compare the number of films watched, music albums listened to, places visited around the globe, and so on. All of this, together with books like *1001 Movies to See* or *Books to Read Before You Die* (Schneider (ed.) 2003, Boxall (ed.) 2012) are part of the same push

towards gamifying, measuring, and comparing our progress with different experiences, and thus is it no longer sufficient to have simply experienced something, we must also record and quantify it as well as proving we have achieved more than our acquaintances, friends, family, or colleagues.

Walking Simulators may be offering a different type of experience that appears to side-step challenge, but this notion of contest is pervasive throughout our society.

6.2.2 The Gameworld of the Walking Simulator

The Walking Simulator, using the medium of the videogame, has fixed boundaries which can be clearly mapped because of its technological materiality (Reynolds 2014: 52); in other words, computer coding necessarily sets out parameters to establish how we interact with it, what we see, and where we can go within the virtual world. The boundaries to this gameworld are creative rather than restrictive; the gameworld developer sets the size and various details which create the boundaries,

whereas the boundaries of a real-life gameworld (a football pitch, for example) are marked out to restrict the game from the rest of the field. Digital computing technology demands that developers create and describe the space which is the field of activity for posters. Reynolds refers to these boundaries as ‘invisible walls’ (Reynolds 2014: 52) and points out that many games are set on islands for this reason; certainly, it would appear that islands and similarly boundaried spaces are popular in Walking Simulators and videogames. In the case of Walking Simulators, some are set on islands: *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012), *Bientôt l’été* (Tale of Tales 2013), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), and *The Novelist* (Orthogonal Games 2013), with both *Edith Finch* and *The Novelist* also taking place mainly in another boundaried structure - a house. Likewise, *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) take place in buildings (a house in the former, an office block in the latter). Bozdog and Galloway suggest that this type of boundaried setting within Walking Simulators enhances involvement for the player (2016: 1) because it feeds into islomania (an obsessional love of islands) that is common in both videogames and literature. Certainly, an island presents a finite and boundaried setting which in turn lends itself naturally to a videogame and Walking

Simulators in particular because only the island needs description and the natural 'end' of the landmass is water surrounding the entire space. An island is a simple concept that we are familiar with and thus no further explanation is necessary to convince posters to involve themselves in this recognisable virtual space. If a gameworld takes place within a landmass, a town or city, for example, there has to be some sort of logical explanation as to why players cannot move beyond the boundaries, and often this will be a city limits sign.

In earlier titles like *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) the story is based upon the folktale, Little Red Riding Hood, and the gameworld is the forest that the girl must travel through to reach her grandmother, but rather than a simple retelling we are able to play Red at different ages and thus explore further connotations embedded within the story as we explore the forest. Although not an island setting, a forest, like an island, has clear geographical boundaries and, like islands, they also hold connotations of mystery and fear within Western culture. Additionally, in the case of *The Path*, a well-known story is used, and this potentially enhances participation because of our existing knowledge (our fairytale schema) we are prepared for the appearance of a wolf as antagonist to the main character of Red, and we know that death will somehow feature and thus

we are left to explore and discover how this Walking Simulator presents the familiar story in a new way. The more recent Walking Simulator, *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016), does not employ an existing folktale, however it does use the real world setting of the Shoshone Forest, and thus again provides a natural familiar boundary, and similarly *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014) has a forest setting, based upon the real world setting of Pilchowice in Poland. In *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* the opening scene is at the end of railway tunnel with the logical movement being away from the tunnel; however, if the tunnel is returned to and followed to its opposite end one finds the original starting place again. In *Firewatch* Henry parks his car in the trailhead carpark and hikes in to the watchtower, but it is impossible to hike back out.

Gone Home (The Fulbright Company 2013) allows us to explore the gameworld of a family house where we can uncover the story of a young woman coming to terms with her sexuality by searching for notes, letters, and other clues that provide us with the narrative. Like an island or a forest, a house is a simple bounded structure with which posters will have familiarity. Likewise, *The Novelist* (Orthogonal Games 2013) uses a house, as does *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), and like

existing cultural mythology of islands and forests, we are familiar with connotations that the setting of a house offers. Each of these settings - island, forest, or house - suggest isolation, retreat, safety, but also imprisonment and being lost or trapped in an inescapable place. It is no surprise that many horror stories are set in these surroundings, and indeed, many Walking Simulators also allow these additional horror and mystery connotations. In *Gone Home*, the setting of a large empty house at night-time during a storm has led some prospective audiences to believe, incorrectly (based upon their existing genre schema) that this is a horror title:



Figure 10: Steam Comment (Whoop_Mofongo 2013)

Walking Simulators encourage posters to explore the gameworld in a way that runs counter to our traditional notions of videogames because they lack conflict and thus the necessity of rapid movement. Walking

Simulators, with their lack of traditional videogame interactivity and emphasis upon slow exploration, allow players to spend time looking at their onscreen surroundings and also provide opportunities for the player to draw subjective conclusions about the onscreen environment that may inform and influence their opinion of the story; in other words, the surroundings and the ways in which the landscape is depicted can tell us something more than simply providing a pretty backdrop. This is a common semiotic method employed in film, for example, where the environment or setting will often inform the audience about genre - many horror films take place in dark secluded locations, Westerns in the plains of the USA, science fiction in space, and so on. In literature and film often the environment will also inform the audience of the mood of the narrative with the use of pathetic fallacy, for example, in the narrative when rain is depicted denoting a sad scene. The audience is aware that logically the rain has no feeling instead it is a natural phenomenon, yet writers, artists, and filmmakers often use this device as a metaphor to carry the intended mood.

In the case of prospective audiences for *Gone Home* thinking it might be a horror game we have an example of the application of their existing schema or knowledge of the horror genre because it utilises common features, as outlined above.

Brendan Keogh suggests this foregrounding of the onscreen environment as a method with which to tell a story is a genre convention for the *Walking Simulator* (Keogh 2015b), and certainly it is exploited within the genre and allows a clear connection to film and television, unlike more traditional videogames that demand greater participation from players and thus less time or need to explore the visual surroundings of the gameworld. Melissa Kagan describes this foregrounding of the gameworld environment as ‘spatial storytelling’ (Kagen 2018), and Bozdog and Galloway (2016: 1) who call it ‘experiential aesthetics’ see the emphasis upon environment as important to this new genre. Muscat et al. (2016) suggests the emphasis upon environment rather than action leaves ‘gaps’ for the poster’s imagination. The absence of contest driven action, the main feature of a game, allows the poster to cease being a player, and instead explore the multimodal gameworld, and make what Muscat et al. (2016: 13) describe as subjective connections - the player is given space (the gaps) to consider and reflect upon the gameworld that surrounds

them.

It is evident from both the existing literature and the titles themselves that the gameworld we are familiar with in videogames is used to a specific *narrative* end within Walking Simulators; the visual aesthetics and virtual space of the gameworld are fundamentally concerned with communicating the narrative of the title, but as with traditional videogames there is currently no research beyond anecdotal evidence from poster forums and critics' observations that supports the notion that the gameworld of the Walking Simulator mediates its story. This points to Walking Simulators being primarily storytelling artefacts that offer readerly experiences rather than gamerly ones because the lack of gamerly experiences offered within the gameworld leaves the poster to reflect upon the purpose of the audiovisual elements and endow it with narrative meaning. The gameworld of a Walking Simulator mediates a particular type of interactive experience that is narrative-orientated rather than ludic-orientated. They foreground story not purely mechanical challenge. We will look for evidence of this in the forums.

6.2.3 Agency in the Walking Simulator

Walking Simulators offer very little in the way of agency beyond that provided by the narrative structure; an exploratory or branching narrative require the reader to interact with the text in a more meaningful way than simply clicking their mouse which is the digital equivalent of turning a page. This is what Aarseth describes as an *ergodic* text, in other words those texts that demand the reader interact by carrying out an act more meaningful than turning a page or clicking a link (Aarseth, 1997: 1), and although Aarseth was discussing electronic hypertext literature, this also holds true for Walking Simulators and certainly those titles that offer very little agency can be described as more of an ergodic text than a truly ludic one.

Walking Simulators offer some limited agency similar to videogames as the player can move around the gameworld but they are generally restricted to a walking pace. Any decisions made by posters in Walking Simulators are related to the narrative structure and as such dealt with later in this chapter when we examine how this genre might be located within the literary domain.

6.3 The Walking Simulator and ‘Literariness’?

The previous chapter proposed, in line with much scholarship across literary linguistics, that while the notion of ‘literary’ is primarily a social and contextual term that shifts and alters with time, there are still some clearly identifiable points which suggest ‘literariness’ (although they are not defining, as they can be found in other discourse forms and contexts too): narrativity, storyworld, immersion, schema refreshment and non-spontaneous interpretation. Posing the following questions of Walking Simulators as a genre can aid location within the literary domain: to what extent is there a clear narrative structure beyond that of a simple linear type? What narrative ‘voice’ point of view are they told in? How does the storyworld of a Walking Simulator operate, and does it offer any significant extension beyond that of the multimodal gameworld presented onscreen? Are there opportunities for readerly agency within Walking Simulators? What kinds of cognitive experience do ‘player-readers’ experience when interacting with these artefacts, in terms of immersion, cognitive ‘work’ and schema change?

6.3.1 What types of narrativity do Walking Simulators offer?

We saw in section 4.1 in chapter 4 that two elements of narrativity may be useful for location of Walking Simulators within a literary domain: the narrative voice in which they are told, and the narrative structure employed to tell that story.

It is a common convention of traditional videogames to use a first-person perspective as this helps to maintain participation and it allows the player to ‘see’ themselves within the gameworld, thus possibly enabling a richer cognitive experience as a ludic deictic shift into the onscreen body of the avatar is achievable. The Walking Simulator, which has developed from the Action-Adventure videogame genre, also draws from the First Person Shooter genre and some early Walking Simulators grew out of First Person Shooter games,¹⁸ so it is to be expected that a similar point of view for the player is employed. Journalist Steve Mullis describes *The Stanley Parable* as a ‘first-person exploration game’ (2013), and this is a good

¹⁸ *Dear Esther* (2012) was originally a modification for the First-Person Shooter game, *Half-Life* (Sierra Studios 1998)

literal description of this and other Walking Simulators because many titles within the genre demand that posters explore the gameworld and they are either embodied onscreen (*Firewatch*) or they offer a direct first person 'eye-camera' where the gameworld lacks an onscreen avatar of any sort and the illusion of being within the gameworld is achieved by our direct control (in the real world) over the camera. Having agency in the gameworld to be able to move and look or search where we want (of course within the confines of the coding for that area or scene) implies a first-person experience as it is us, the player, who controls the experience, unlike a film for example, where the director and producer have made these decisions. In videogames this is reinforced using a visible avatar: us onscreen. Walking Simulators largely follow this established point of view, as the table below shows:

| Year of release | Title | Developer | Point of View | Narrative Structure |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| 2008 | The Graveyard | Tale of Tales | 3rd | Simple linear |
| 2009 | The Path | Tale of Tales | 3rd | Repeated linear |
| 2012 | Dear Esther | The Chinese Room | 1st within the gameworld, some 2nd in the storyworld | Exploratory within the gameworld, non-linear in the storyworld |
| 2013 | Gone Home | The Fullbright Company | 1st | Exploratory |
| 2013 | The Stanley Parable | Galactic Cafe | 1st | Branching |
| 2013 | The Novelist | Orthogonal Games | Omniscient | Exploratory/Branching hybrid |
| 2014 | The Vanishing of Ethan Carter | The Astronauts | 1st | Exploratory |
| 2015 | Everybody's Gone to the Rapture | The Chinese Room | 1st | Exploratory |
| 2015 | The Beginner's Guide | Galactic Cafe | 1st | Linear |
| 2016 | Firewatch | Campo Santo | 1st | Linear (prologue) Exploratory |
| 2016 | That Dragon, Cancer | Numinous Games | 1st | Linear |
| 2016 | Virginia | Variable State | 1st | Linear |
| 2017 | What Remains of Edith Finch | Giant Sparrow | 1st | Exploratory |

Table 5 - Walking Simulator narratives

Two of the first Walking Simulator type games, *The Graveyard* (2008), and *The Path* (2009), both from Tale of Tales, show a third person point of

view. Unlike those other titles offering the direct first-person view from the camera (either embodied in an avatar that we can ‘look’ down at, as with *Firewatch*, or disembodied but direct real world control over the camera as with most first person videogames), a third person point of view allows the poster to see and control an onscreen avatar. A third person point of view in text discourse is s/he/it/them, compared to first person ‘I’, and thus the reader may feel more involved and empathetic to a first-person narrative rather than third person which suggests the narrative is not ‘ours’. This is not to say that a third person narrative cannot be deeply involving, but rather that the reader is deictically alongside the protagonist rather than seeing the world through their eyes. This may, at first, seem a very minor shift as in either case the reader still ‘sees’ or imagines the events and can be entirely engaged with the story, but it is commonly accepted (Keen 2006: 215) that first-person narrations in fiction evoke greater empathy in readers than third person narrations. I have reiterated Keen’s point here, but it must be noted that both her 2006 article and subsequent 2007 book *Empathy and the Novel* point out that this is a simplification of how empathy is evoked by texts. Keen (2006: 216) suggests that character identification is key in activating empathy in readers, but it is not clear if first or third person narration is more

effective. Likewise, Van Lissa et al's 2018 article on reader engagement suggests that empathy is more complex than the possible close relationship evoked by a first-person narration. It may be that the Steam gamer forums can shed further light upon the empathy felt by posters of *Walking Simulators* and whether it is possible to distinguish a more gamerly or readerly empathy linked to the narrative presentation within the title and the identification suggested by the poster comments.

The Novelist (2013) uniquely offers an observational omniscient point of view where the player is a ghost-like character entirely out of the narrative but still interactive within the gameworld and storyworld in what Marie Laure Ryan (Ryan 2002) would describe as an external 'role of a god' (2002: 595) ontological ('the decisions of the users send the history of the virtual world on different forking paths' (2002: 596) mode. At the end of each chapter section the player is given choices to make for the main character of Dan Kaplan, so at this point the player becomes a god as they have seen each characters' behaviour, but this is a limited omniscient more in common with the objective focalisation used by writers like Ernest Hemingway, as the player can only imagine what each character is feeling and thus choose which 'forking path' the characters should then take. This type of narrative point of view found in *The Novelist* is more

common in true simulation type games and might therefore lead to less transportation immersion for the audience which will be addressed within the case study for this title in chapter 9.

Let us now turn to the types of narrative structure used in Walking Simulators.

6.3.1.1 Linear Narratives

Tale of Tales' first title, *The Graveyard* (2008) features a simple linear narrative of an elderly woman walking through a graveyard to sit on a bench, and then she reflects on the losses in her life; the user can only click on the mouse or forward button for the story to proceed. *Virginia* (2016) also uses this type of narrative, and although there are occasional opportunities to wander around a room, mostly interactivity consists of moving the mouse around until the cursor changes from a dot to a diamond or circle, then clicking and another animation begins. This very pared down style of *Virginia* has led to critics suggesting that this title is

more film-like than game-like, and in turn its lack of recognisable game elements makes it unpopular amongst those players who do not like Walking Simulators (Kain (2016), Campbell (2016), Gordon (2016)). This type of narrative being structurally straightforward allows the developers to maintain tight authorial control because users cannot explore the onscreen gameworld with quite the same freedom as offered by an exploratory narrative, for example. Like a film or prose fiction, a simple linear structure in a Walking Simulator withdraws all but the most basic affordances of agency or control and thus aligns them closely with electronic or digital literature rather than traditional videogame.

The Beginner's Guide and *That Dragon, Cancer* both feature linear narratives that operate with a similar structure to traditional videogames rather than a literary text. In both cases the narrative is broken into chapters or sections which follow each other in a simple linear way, but within those sections there are small ludic tasks, but there is no true conflict or challenge. The second chapter of *The Beginner's Guide*, for example, demands users move backwards onscreen and then various pieces of text are revealed on the walls of the gameworld structure, but as forward motion is entirely impossible within this section moving backwards presents no challenge, yet it must be completed to move on to

the next chapter. In a linear narrative like these titles the similarity to a traditional videogame is very apparent, and in fact in the case of *The Beginner's Guide* the entire narrative is centred around videogame development, which is perhaps to be expected of the creator of *The Stanley Parable* which also focuses upon the videogame as a medium and how we might interact with them.

6.3.1.2 Repeated Linear Narratives

The Path from Tale of Tales features a linear narrative based upon the folktale *Little Red Riding Hood* where the gameworld is a large forest that six differently aged Red Riding Hoods must in turn explore until they meet their wolf antagonist, each one appropriate to the age of the girl, and then their fate in Grandma's house. We know how this story will end because we know the folktale, and although there is a little exploratory storytelling provided by various objects that can be found by the corresponding Red Riding Hood which illuminates her character, essentially this is a linear narrative repeated six times over. Users are

provided with this additional richness to their experience by being able to wander at will and find objects (those age-appropriate characterisation objects, and flowers, for example) but there is still no true control over the narrative; we cannot refuse to go with the wolf, fight him, rescue grandma, or in any way alter the outcome as we might in a traditional videogame and thus have the appearance of agency and control. The narrative is a repeated linear type because we are able to experience the story six times over with each Red Riding Hood from small child to young woman, and this in turn offers a slightly altered experience each time as the notion of adolescence and loss of innocence is suggested and reinforced with each version of Red Riding Hood. The forest remains the same, but the girls and the wolves alter thus providing metaphors that reinforce fears of puberty, sex, abuse, and death.

6.3.1.3 Exploratory linear Narratives

We saw in the previous chapter exploratory linear narratives are those where the reader must search the onscreen world for fragments that then can be arranged to constitute the story, and these are not uncommon in digital or electronic literature. This form is also common in Point and Click adventure videogames and also narrative rich Adventure and First-Person Shooter videogames. These types rely upon the users exploring the onscreen gameworld to find items that can be used to solve puzzles, or in the case of Walking Simulators, items that either provide a little more of the unfolding narrative, or points in the gameworld that trigger pieces of narrative. *Gone Home* relies upon this exploratory method and thus makes this title closer to traditional videogames because users are familiar with opening cupboards, searching rooms, and interacting with the gameworld in the same way that they might an Adventure videogame. An exploratory narrative, because it relies upon the participant finding or triggering clues or narrative, does not have to be reliant upon a linear unfolding plot to provide tension, and instead the user must assemble all the narrative before considering what the possible order of events may have been. Certainly, this is largely the case for *Gone Home* and any plot

tension or control of unfolding events is achieved by simple puzzles like discovering the combination for a lock upon a safe.

However, most exploratory narratives offered in digital literature and Walking Simulators tends to be constrained by either the onscreen environment (the gameworld in Walking Simulators) or some form of time-bound constraint (*Firewatch* appears to happen within the same forest but each 'day' offers different narrative elements to be discovered, for example). By limiting users to a single space: *What Remains of Edith Finch* provides this by having rooms that can only be entered by turn dependent upon previously revealed narrative elements; *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* provides a path through a forest leading to a small village and again some narrative elements are revealed on condition of previous items having been discovered; *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* likewise employs the gameworld setting of a small village which users cannot leave until they have found all the narrative fragments and then they are able to move to the outskirts where further 'chapters' are located.

6.3.1.4 Non-Linear Narratives

In the same way that non-linear narratives are uncommon in literary texts (unlike film, as mentioned in the previous chapter), they are also uncommon in Walking Simulators. Currently the only Walking Simulator that offers this type of narrative structure is *Dear Esther* (2012) and this is separate from the onscreen environment of the Hebridean island where the user may explore caves and coastline in a broadly linear fashion as the path leads inexorably to the climax of the story at the summit of the radio mast on the highest point of the island. *Dear Esther* has a dual narrative: the participant's linear journey as the main (unnamed) protagonist, and the non-linear 'history' presented in audiovisual fragments as the linear journey is made. This makes *Dear Esther* a particularly challenging storytelling artefact because at least five different possible worlds (Colthup 2018: 125) are presented within the 'textual' fragments that appear onscreen and are read aloud by the narrator.

Non-linear narration is perhaps the most demanding for the users of Walking Simulators because they must hold the threads of the narrative in their mind's created storyworld and organise or reorganise as each new piece of information is received.

6.3.1.5 Branching

The Stanley Parable (2013) is the only Walking Simulator within our data set to offer a true branching narrative; *The Novelist* offers a branching narrative in its wider story-arc, but each ‘day’ offers an exploratory narrative.

Ryan suggests that a branching narrative puts the user into the authorial position (Ryan 2002: 599) because they are forced to make a decision about what will happen next and thus are pushed out of the storyworld because they are no longer alongside the protagonists watching their fate unfold as experienced when reading fiction, instead they must decide whether Stanley follows the narrator’s instructions or not, for example. However, this is a conceit of authorial control: in the case of *The Stanley Parable* there are a finite number of endings (see the diagram below), and in each case this has been written and coded by the developers, thus the ‘control’ enabled by the branching narrative is simply one of choice from a fixed set of outcomes. With *The Novelist*, as we shall see in the case study later, the outcome is reliant upon scored choices as this particular title operates more like a traditional video game than most Walking Simulators, however, it still remains that the developer has retained their

true authorial control by conceiving all possible outcomes. Ryan suggests that branching narratives lead us to contemplate the whole field of possibilities within the story, the entire system, and how it is interconnected (Ryan 2002: 599), in other words, we become something like an omniscient narrator, however, unlike the author we still cannot know the outcomes, but part of the experience will be this contemplation of possibilities and likely outcomes. *The Stanley Parable* is set in an office building so we may believe that outcomes will be related to that setting, but as the plot diagram shows below, the possibilities are often bizarre, and plot tension is maintained by each decision branch being short and fairly linear.

THE STANLEY PARABLE THE STANLEY PARABLE THE STANLEY PARABLE
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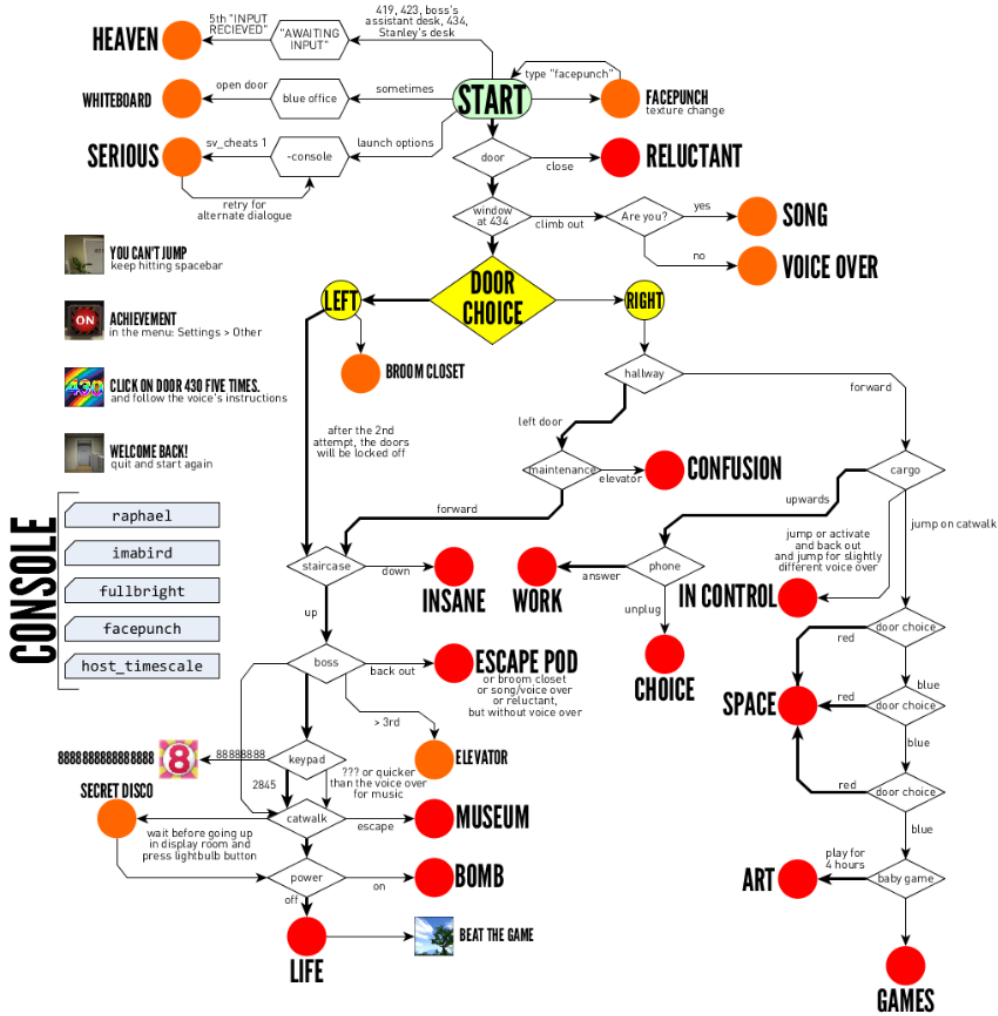


Figure 11: The Stanley Parable Branching narrative structure (imgur.com 2018)

As *The Stanley Parable* is a story that plays with the conventions of videogames it is entirely appropriate that the aim is to reach the end, and as the flowchart shows, there are 13 ‘true’ endings (the red spots) where the story automatically restarts with an additional nine apparent endings (the orange spots) where the user must manually restart or remain in that space. These multiple endings encourage users to start again and uncover

new narrative threads. Likewise, *The Novelist* encourages replay to achieve a 'better' or different ending dependent upon the choices made at the end of each 'day' within the story. This encouraged replaying or revisiting is significant because it is a key element of most traditional videogames where the challenges demanded in gameplay are such that the player must often replay sections to complete them because they require particular hand-eye skills and repetitive physical motions (the avatar jumping at the correct moment, a particular number of enemies killed, a building scaled in a short time frame, and so on) and thus move the action forward. The player returns until their kinetic skills meet the required standard and they can move onto the next section of the game. However, Walking Simulators do not offer gamerly challenges, yet this repetition is evident in some titles like *The Stanley Parable* and *The Novelist*. With both of these titles the repetition is to explore all possible narrative avenues and thus gain a 'complete' reading of the title. Thus Walking Simulators encourage *rereading* rather than *replaying*.

6.3.2 The Storyworld of the Walking Simulator

Storyworld, as we saw in the previous chapter, is not limited by the technical affordances of the videogame medium like a gameworld; instead, the only restrictions of a storyworld are those decided by the author. As we have seen the gameworld is created by the onscreen environment of what the player can see and hear, but storyworld is created by the suggestions made in the text (whether received by reading or listening) and the reader imagines their personal version (based upon their schemas). This freedom from onscreen depiction of every narrative element gives rise to a particular feature found in the Walking Simulator: superfluous intrigue, which are additional plot lines or motifs unconnected to the main plot but enriching the overall story. These elements are often introduced via onscreen textual objects; letters or notes that can be picked up and examined (*Firewatch* (2016) and *The Novelist* (2013) both employ this method). Other methods include text or voiceover within the game that does not further the game plot but instead mentions 'off stage' characters; *Dear Esther* (2012), *Virginia* (2016), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), and *Firewatch* (2016) all use this method. The use of a text-based narrative thread that is not directly

connected to the main plot, superfluous intrigue, means that the storyworld is not onscreen and it has not been fully realised by the game designers and coders. As mentioned above the gameworld is bounded by its coding and the developers aim is to control the player's experience within the gameworld. The introduction of superfluous intrigue that is beyond or outside the gameworld and thus only evidenced upon the screen via textual elements, offers the player the additional role and experience as a reader. These elements, being superfluous, can be ignored by the player and the *Walking Simulator* can still be completed within the gameworld. In the case of *Firewatch* (2016), for example, there are supply caches dotted around the gameworld of the forest. In many of the caches there are items that can be picked up and examined; pinecones, books, and notes. Each of these are generally useless but add to the atmosphere and authenticity of the *Firewatch* gameworld, apart from the notes that have been written by previous 'watchers'. These notes, at first glance, are an exchange about women and girlfriends written by two male watchers, Ron and Dave.

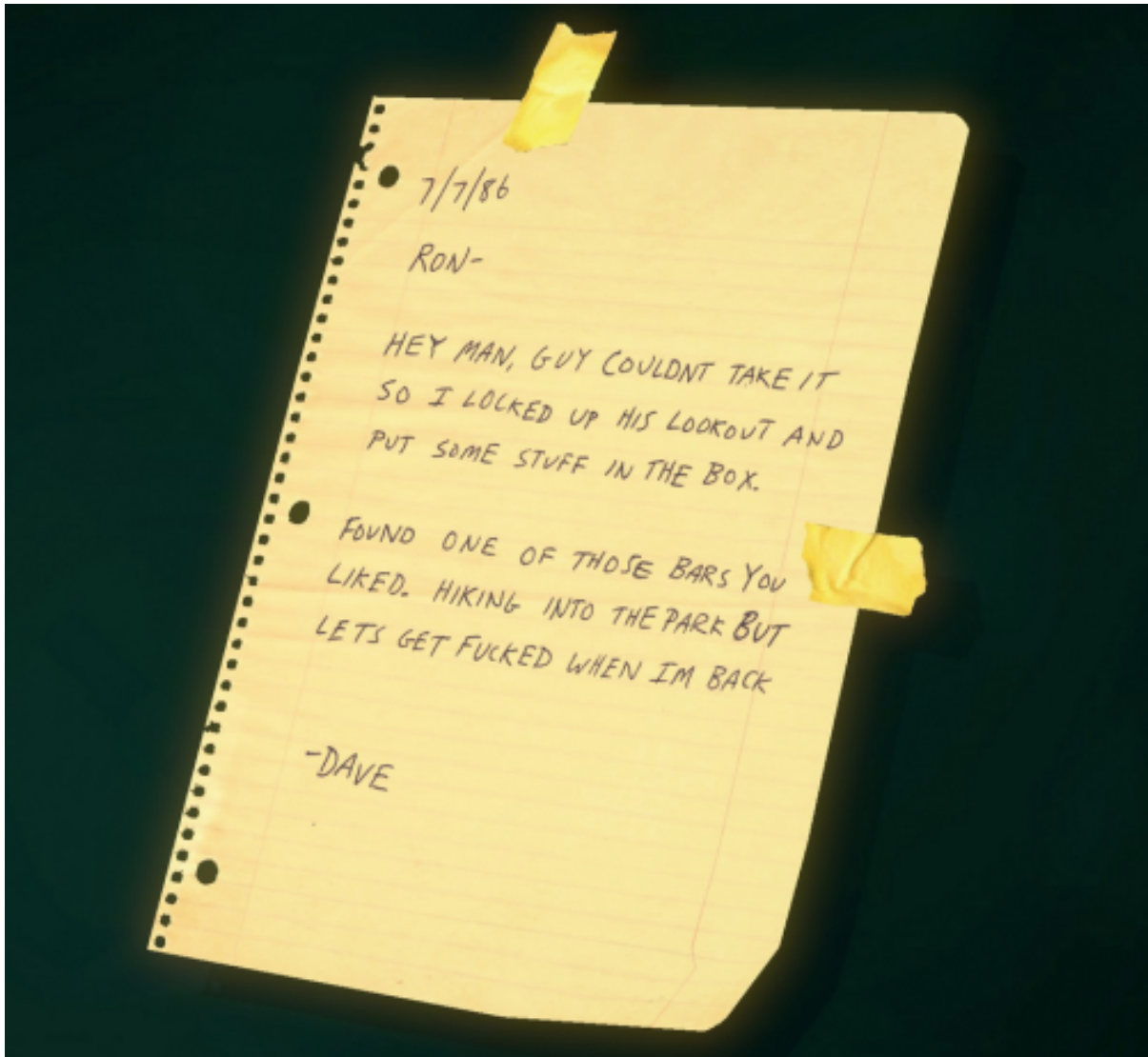


Figure 12: Firewatch screenshot - Note to Dave from Ron

It becomes apparent, as more notes are read, that there are homosexual overtones to these notes, and the reader is possibly reminded of Annie Proulx's short story (1997), and subsequent film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) which is set in a similar area of the United States. This minor subplot has no wider bearing upon the main story of *Firewatch* (2016), but it provides an interesting additional feature for users. It also demands the creation of a further 'possible world' (Ryan, 2013: 1) where Dave and Ron

exist in the past of the Shoshone National Forest as it is described visually within the gameworld that features Henry.

Similarly, *Dear Esther* (2012) features within its confusing narrative, a subplot concerning the author of the island guidebook carried by the game's unnamed protagonist. *Virginia* (2016) hints at problems the protagonist's father had experienced within their job some decades before. *The Novelist* (2013) contains letters and diary entries written by previous occupants of the holiday house where the game events take place, yet, as with other Walking Simulators, none of these interesting sub, or side plots, are necessary for the main story or game to be completed. Users of Walking Simulators are given these fascinating nuggets to broaden and enrich their personal version of the storyworld, without having it entirely mapped out.

Walking Simulators feature complex narratives that require players to 'hold' multiple plot threads within their imagination simultaneously. This is not always connected to the multiple endings that feature in some Walking Simulators, as mentioned below, but rather like literary novels where subplots, themes, and motifs are employed to deepen the reader's interest and engagement.

6.4 Cognitive Approaches

If the foregrounding of narrative can be deemed a significant indicator of 'literariness', then the nature of the player-reader's cognitive experience of the 'text' is also significant. In the previous two chapters we saw a number of different cognitive approaches that find parallels and echoes in both gamerly and readerly cognition. As Walking Simulators find themselves located in a space that shares elements of videogames and literary texts it is useful to now draw the two cognitive domains together in search of more nuanced location; in other words what types of attention, immersion or deictic shift are users of Walking Simulators more likely to experience based upon the artefacts themselves, do they offer a more gamerly or readerly cognitive experience? Then once we have a hypothesis about the domain Walking Simulators should be located within, we will be able to turn to the Steam gamer forums and search for evidence that confirms or disputes this hypothesis.

6.4.1 Attention in the Walking Simulator

Walking Simulators are experienced slowly; it is impossible to move rapidly and indeed there is no necessity to do so as no challenges requiring this are posed. Where multiple elements of information are offered in different modes (audio, visual, or textual) there is no necessity to respond to this information at speed, instead the information can be accessed again when needed. In short, Walking Simulators do not demand hyperattention from its users.

Hayles, as we saw in the previous chapter, suggests that a single stream of information (Hayles 2007: 187) incites deep attention as experienced when reading literary texts, and Furlong, again discussed in the previous chapter, says that participants then need time to interpret the stream of information. However, this notion of a single stream of information is a little misleading because many literary texts present this inasmuch as the text itself on a page or screen is unidirectional and linear because that is how we read and understand text, but the information communicated in many literary texts is often in multiple streams. A single sentence of dialogue in a literary text may convey multiple meanings and inform the reader about the character speaking, the overarching plot, the current

setting, the relationships within the text, and so on. Hayles notion of a single stream of information is tied to its modality; videogames and reading a website offers multiple modes of information as the hyperattentive reader (or player) will be presented with images (possibly both still and moving), text, audio narration, sound effects, music soundtrack, and so on. Attending to multiple modes thus incites hyperattention, and as mentioned above, when Walking Simulators present multiple modes of information, the user can attend to each in turn and at their own pace in the same way that a reader of a literary text might, thus negating any possible hyperattention incitement. In addition, Walking Simulators actively work against rapid attention because they do not tend to allow movement onscreen beyond a walking pace, their stories unfold slowly, and users are given ample opportunities to stop and reflect upon the experience. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), like *Firewatch* (2016), and *Dear Esther* (2012) present aesthetically pleasing gameworlds that encourage a slower interactive experience, and this may in turn incite deep attention, and as such this should be in evidence from the Steam gamer forums if posters report spending long periods of time within these experiences.

6.4.2 Immersion in the Walking Simulator

As we have seen in the previous two chapters being immersed in a pleasurable activity is desirable and if it is a gamely activity then one is likely to experience *flow* immersion, whereas if it is a readerly activity then one is likely to experience *transportation* immersion.

The key elements that constitute flow immersion are: intense concentration in the present moment; merging of action and awareness; loss of self-awareness; temporal distortion; favouring of process over end goal (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009: 90). This type of immersion, as explained in chapter 3 happens with videogames when the player is engaged in the physical activity of pressing keys on a controller which then causes the player's avatar to move and react according to the ongoing onscreen events. These onscreen events in most traditional videogames are rapid action and grounded in conflict; shooting at opponents, fighting opponents, driving a vehicle in some form of race, climbing or otherwise moving rapidly to escape from opponents or to chase them. Walking Simulators, not featuring agon, the categorisation of conflict and competition in games, therefore do not offer true flow immersion.

Transportation immersion, a readerly form of immersion may be found in Walking Simulators if there is evidence of deep attention as described by Hayles and the suggestions from Furlong on rereading. If users are spending time experiencing the storyworld and gameworld of the Walking Simulator then it is likely that as they offer no flow immersion within the gameworld, instead transportation immersion occurs.

Transportation immersion, using Ryan's model includes: spatial immersion, spatio-temporal immersion, temporal immersion, and emotional immersion (2015: 85-114), as we saw in the previous chapter in section 4.4.4. Identifying these types of transportation immersion within Walking Simulators will, like deep attention, be found within anecdotal evidence from posters commenting within the Steam gamer forums. It is likely that comments will refer to audio-visual elements found in the gameworld which aid immersion. McIntyre (2008: 313) suggests that the *mise-en-scène* of the audio-visual elements should be taken into consideration when analysing drama, and as such this can also be applied to the gameworld of the Walking Simulator where setting, in particular, foregrounds the narrative as also happens in film and thus aids a readerly immersion. It is likely that emotional immersion will be the easiest to identify if posters discuss their feelings about, reactions to and hopes for

the characters.

6.4.3 Deictic Shift in the Walking Simulator

We have seen in the previous chapters that users playing videogames or reading literary text, in addition to the type of focus in attention and immersion they experience and as part of this, can also feel a locational shift. The player of a videogame may realise themselves onscreen as the avatar and move in reaction and relation to events onscreen, and as we saw in chapter 3, this process of moving from the real world into the gameworld is gradual and involves navigating the various ‘worlds’ onscreen. The reader is figuratively alongside the protagonist in a literary text observing the events that happen there, and like the player they also make a gradual shift from the real world to the storyworld and this is enacted by a variety of literary devices and techniques involving positional language. Identifying the type of deictic shift, the reader/player experiences with Walking Simulators will enable further classification within the domain of videogames or literary artefact: do posters report

being in the world themselves as active participants or alongside the characters as passive, or semi-passive observers? Anecdotal evidence and reader/player reporting as seen in the Steam forums for each of the case studies will further support the identification of Walking Simulators if it offers users an embodied deictic *ludic* shift, or a passive deictic *literary* shift.

6.4.4 Schema in Walking Simulators

Cook's work on schema theory and how it can be used to analyse literary discourse (1989, 1990, 1994, 1997), along with the extensions of this by Stockwell (2005, 2019) and, among others, Giovanelli and Mason (2015), provide a starting point for the analysis of poster comments about Walking Simulators because the mismatch between expectations based upon existing schemas of videogames and the reality of a Walking Simulator experience may explain negative attitudes often expressed about this new genre as we will see in the case studies. Cook explains that schema theory provides a structure from which the reader is able to

identify the presented discourse (1990: 213), in this case the Walking Simulator. In other words when faced with a new form of discourse we apply our existing knowledge, filling in gaps with this knowledge until the discourse directs us to do otherwise. If one has only played videogames that model sports or battles, then an experience that foregrounds story is likely to disappoint. This disappointment is not confined to videogames because if we read a thriller novel and it follows our previous reading experiences of thrillers then we will be easily immersed and enjoy the experience (Cook 1989: 25), our schema for this genre is refreshed and confirmed and this provides pleasure.

Schemas of videogame playing (i.e. genre schema) may well be refreshed by experiencing a Walking Simulator, and thus the user will expand their schema to include this genre, despite it lacking challenge, competition, or chance. Alternatively, we may see from the comments within the Steam gamer forums that there is a rejection of Walking Simulators as a videogame because they do not conform to user's genre schema and the disruption presented is not sufficiently engaging or appealing to enable refreshment, and thus replacement (Stockwell 2019).

We may also see the activation of schema indicative of spatial immersion as Ryan suggests that personal memories (2015: 86) are often brought to

mind as part of literary transportation immersion. Strongly mimetic gameworlds are likely to generate personal memory schema and this would suggest that realistic recreation of places visited may aid spatial immersion.

Thus, there are two elements that need investigation within the forums: evidence of videogame schema confirmation or disruption leading to refreshment or rejection; and evidence of personal memory schema activation arising from a mimetic gameworld.

6.4.5 Rereading or replaying in Walking Simulators

If we follow Furlong's suggestions about rereading, as discussed previously (4.4.2) we should be seeking evidence of users returning to Walking Simulators for two purposes: to fully understand the text by exploring all plausible meanings to arrive at a satisfying unified reading; and to re-experience the storyworld because it offers some form of satisfying comfort.

Identification of rereading or re-experiencing among users of Walking Simulators will suggest two conclusions: firstly that this new form is sufficiently engaging to induce immersion of some type; and secondly further identification and categorisation of the type of rereading or re-experiencing will suggest whether Walking Simulators offer demanding experiences that are similar to reading demanding literary texts, or highly pleasurable experiences that are similar to those of 'comfort reading'. In other words, by examining what posters voluntarily report about rereading, reinterpreting or re-experiencing Walking Simulators we will be able to better locate them within the domain of videogames or literary artefacts; they will exhibit, then, features of literary reading. Again, this suggests that reporting from participants detailing spending time or returning to the title for the purposes of understanding or comfort suggests that Walking Simulators incite a readerly rather than gamerly cognitive experience.

Chapter 7 Case Study 1: Dear Esther

Dear Esther was released commercially on the Steam PC gaming platform in 2012 by The Chinese Room (it had previously been released in 2008 as a free 'mod' or modification to the game *Half Life* (Valve 1998)), and by 2019 around 830,000-840,000 copies were sold (Anon/Pinchbeck 2019). The data used for analysis is the artefact of *Dear Esther* itself as it appears on Steam, and 60 posts from the Steam discussion forum. The forum had 256 active threads - starting in 2014 and continuing to the 8th December 2019. Those 60 posts come from 30 individual threads, and are 11,203 words in total, which fit the expected evidence as set out in the previous chapter and cover the following areas related to cognition: attention, immersion, deictic shift, schema, and revisiting.

We will turn first to *Dear Esther* itself and examine its gameworld and storyworld, then onto the five cognitive of investigation where the data has been drawn from the Steam forum.

7.1 Gameworld

The onscreen gameworld of *Dear Esther* opens upon a shoreline next to an abandoned lighthouse and sheds that have chemical symbols graffitied onto the interior walls in fluorescent paint. The visual world has a high degree of verisimilitude with audio sound effects of a seashore to match. A voiceover begins almost immediately, closely followed by orchestral music to match the somewhat sombre tone of the voice and the dark skies of the island. Unable to pick up any items, participation is limited to moving around the island (the gameworld) with a first-person view.

The onscreen gameworld is augmented by the text and audio fragment here as the overcast unsettled weather go to create the literary effect of pathetic fallacy where we have the suggestion from the skies that the island is unsettled, dark, and depressing. As mentioned earlier, this device of endowing natural phenomena with human emotion provides a simple shortcut for the audience to understand the mood. This application of pathetic fallacy is particularly useful here if we return to Ruskin's original definition:

The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same

effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "Pathetic fallacy." (Ruskin 1866: 157)

Ruskin's definition applies to the gameworld of *Dear Esther* as the depiction of dark skies and stormy weather creates this equally dark tone which is entirely fitting to the story; our unnamed narrator is dealing with the loss of his wife, Esther, and approaching death himself. This man's narration, the user soon discovers is completely 'unhinged by grief', and therefore a good example of pathetic fallacy. It is also of note that the soundtrack of piano music played in a minor key overlaid onto the sound effects of waves add to the user feelings of melancholy and of the sublime, as suggested by O'Sullivan (2017). While this thesis does not deal with how sound also enables the participant to make the cognitive shift into the game and storyworld, it is of particular importance in this title, and has been discussed recently by Hambleton (2020).

The gameworld of *Dear Esther* supports and is exploited by the narrative aims in the same way that a literary text's setting does, and as such this marks it as a literary artefact from the outset. Now let us turn to the storyworld, as experienced and 'built' by the player-reader, of *Dear Esther* to examine how its narrative structure and point of view support its literary nature.

7.2 Storyworld

Dear Esther has four scripts, broken up into 113 different fragments, each one randomly used with every new run-through. The voiceover, and, if desired, textual subtitles, are triggered at points throughout the journey to the summit of the island which is the destination for the resolution of the story. The narrative structure presented in *Dear Esther* is two-fold - one linear, the other non-linear; Dan Pinchbeck, the author, wrote four different scripts and each of these can only be accessed with repeated participation in the game, but the scripts are not presented in totality with each repeat. Each trigger point within the gameworld broadly follows one after the other as there is little opportunity for users to stray excessively from the linear path, hence this presentation being spatially linear and not affording a great deal of agency. However, within the different narrative strands of the plot they are presented in a non-linear fashion which demands the reader hold the various threads and then make sense of the story after hearing or reading all the fragments. At each trigger point the reader may receive text A, B, C, or D (a first reading might be 1A, 2B, 3A, 4D, 5B, 6C, 7A, the second reading 1B, 2B, 3C, 4D, and

so on), thus providing multiple different versions that are all similar but present ongoing opportunities for a personalised reading (Colthup 2018: 139).

Let us now turn to the opening of each of the four scripts to examine how the storyworld is presented and what narratological and stylistic features are likely to offer cognitive effects upon the reader as they first enter the gameworld of *Dear Esther* and remembering that only one of these scripts will appear and to read others users must revisit the beginning and start anew. Here we will use elements of Text World Theory to examine the scripts as the fine-grained discourse grammar can allow identification of how the wider storyworld is built from multiple linguistic input.

Script A²⁰

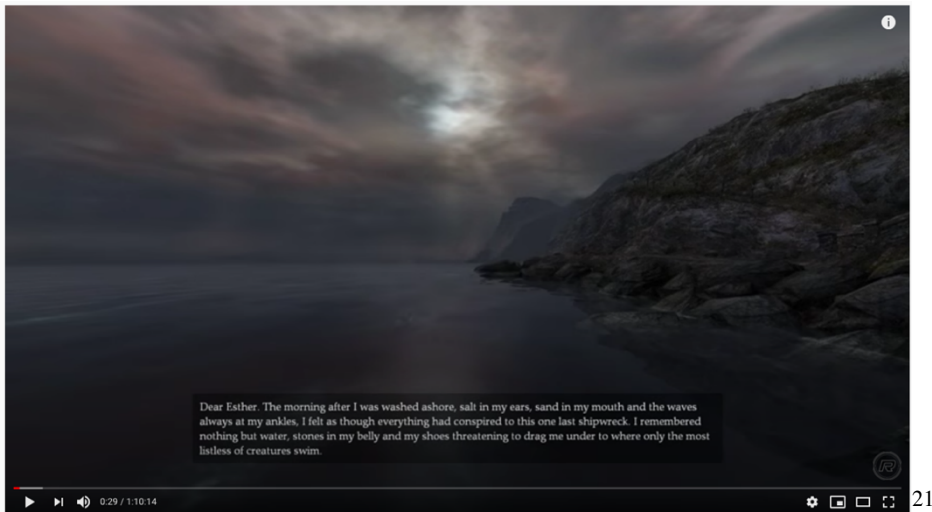


Figure 13: *Dear Esther* Fragment 1 Script A screenshot

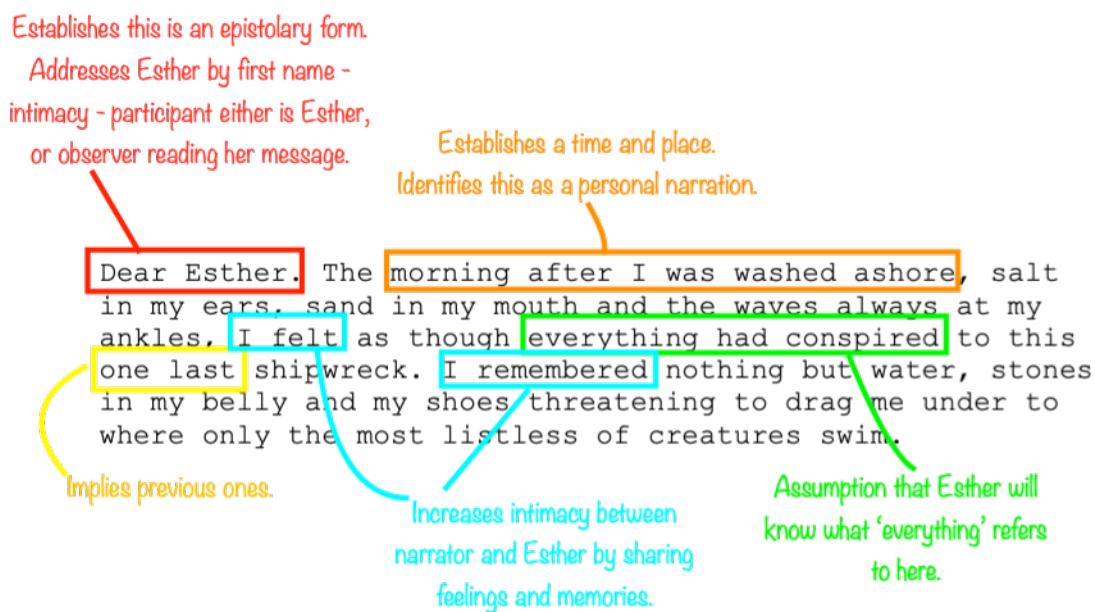


Figure 14: Fragment 1A stylistic analysis

²⁰ These are my denotations of script A, B, C, D and not those of Dan Pinchbeck, or The Chinese Room. They are added here for ease of differentiation within discussions.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEjvpHpVyiw> [Accessed 01/06/2016]

The primary text world (Gavins 2007) in this fragment is the narrator's world where the text provides spatial and temporal deictic language of being on the island ('washed ashore') during daytime ('the morning'), and in the third sentence the additional deictic language of 'everything' which demands the reader employ their schema of islands, and, indeed, 'shipwreck schema', to fill in the details about being washed ashore. As mentioned in 4.4.1, the reader fills in the gaps based upon the text presented which affords 'conceptual dependency' that Stockwell describes (2019: 93). As it is unlikely most users will have had this experience it is more likely that schemas drawn from shipwreck narratives will be used: *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1719), *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1726), or more recently *Life of Pi* (Martel 2001).

The second text world is the day before which the narrator can only remember nearly drowning ('water...threatening to drag me under') as he was shipwrecked and providing the reader with more deictic direction placing the narrator in the water before arriving (in the primary text world) on the shore of the island. There is also a hint of planned self-harm in the narrator's remembered experience where he says 'stones in my belly' which could refer to a physical condition (gall stones, perhaps), or possibly inciting a reader memory schema of the Grimms' folktale of *The*

Wolf and the Seven Little Kids (Grimm 1857) where the predatory wolf is defeated and dispatched by having stones sewn into his belly and falling down a well where he drowns.

A third text world is suggested within the second world of the water where the 'most listless of creatures swim' and the narrator in the second text world may be dragged under into this imagined world. The fourth text world is that in which Esther lives, and perhaps the narrator also once lived. The epistolary opening ('dear') also suggests an intimate relationship between our narrator and Esther as well as establishing that she is not with him, hence the need to write to her.

The reader is also likely to make the logical assumption that this letter is unlikely to ever reach Esther because the text points to the narrator having been trapped on the island for some time, and this another attempt to escape the island ('this one last shipwreck'). Based on existing action and adventure narrative schema the reader may assume that this is a story of final escape from the island. The island schema is also scaffolded by 'sand', 'waves', 'water', as well as 'salt' which tells us this is not an inland freshwater island on a lake or similar body of water, but offshore and therefore more likely to present danger (reinforced by the possibility of being dragged under), again suggesting familiar narrative

tropes.

Where the text world (TW) overlaps within the diagram below this denotes contingency; the day before is followed by the morning after.

Where a text world is located within another world this is illustrated by one circle within another, as below. The island is also geographically represented by the green square which in turn allows the illustration that Esther must logically be off the island.

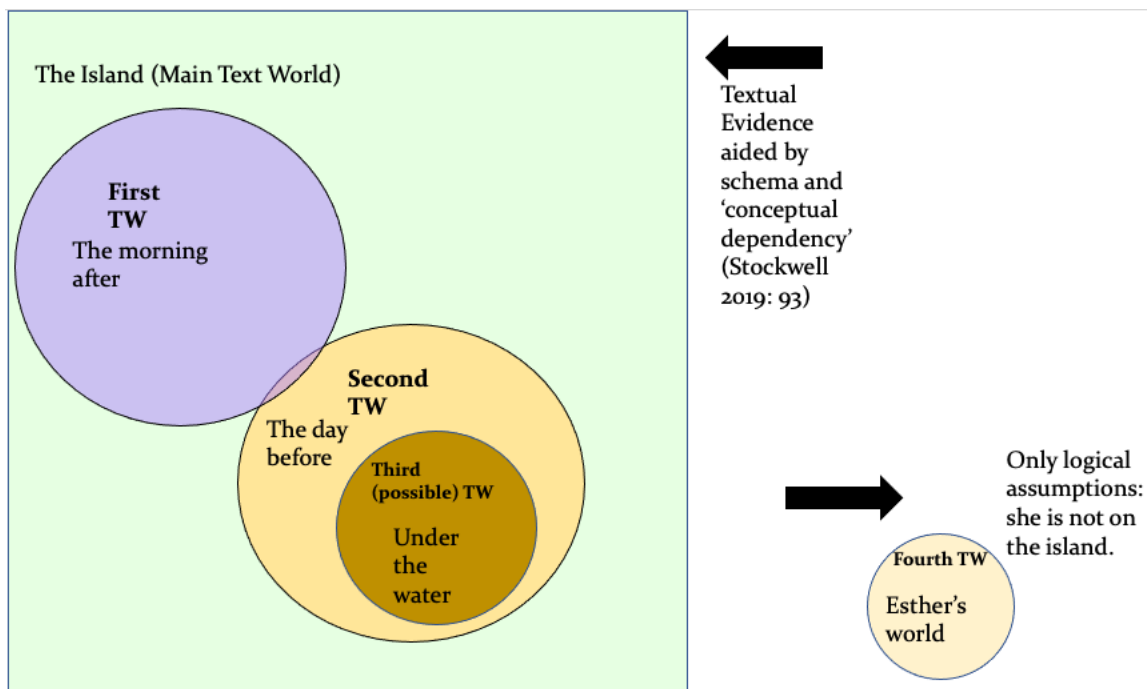


Figure 15: The text world of Dear Esther, fragment 1, text A

Script B

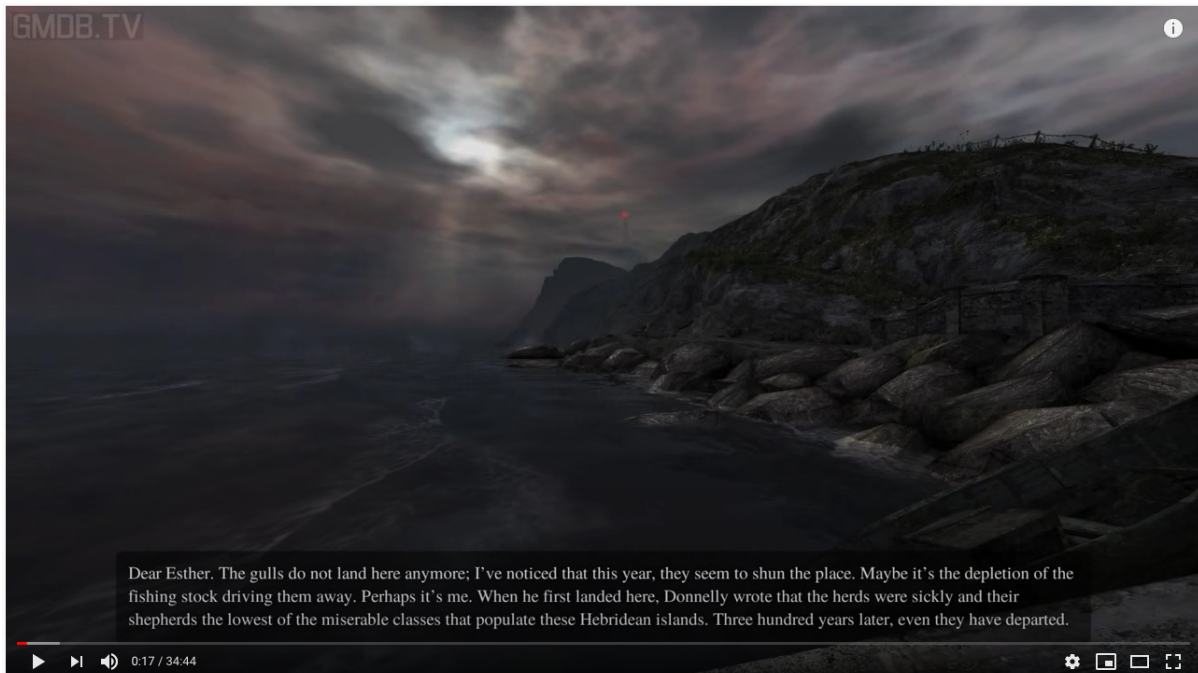


Figure 16: *Dear Esther* Fragment 1 Script B screenshot

Establishes this is an epistolary form. Addresses Esther by first name - intimacy - participant either is Esther, or observer reading her message

Previous knowledge of the island

Dear Esther The gulls do not land here anymore. I've noticed that this year, they seem to shun the place. Maybe it's the depletion of the fishing stock driving them away. Perhaps it's me. When he first landed here, Donnelly wrote that the herds were sickly and their shepherds the lowest of the miserable classes that populate these Hebridean islands. Three hundred years later, even they have departed.

Additional character, Donnelly

Establishes knowledge of the island's past, and it's present abandoned and uninhabited state.

Figure 17: Fragment 1B stylistic analysis

This version of the opening scene offers a primary world again found in the first sentence after the address to Esther where the narrator tells us that he has either been on this island for a long time ('anymore', 'this year') or he has visited many times before, as also implied in the first fragment of script A. Deictic language in this fragment anchor the gameworld audiovisual setting with 'here', 'the place', 'away', and then the explicit naming of this place as part of 'these Hebridean islands'. The previous visits or the time before this present offer a secondary text world when the gulls did land on the island. A third text world is also established with the introduction of another character, Donnelly, who 'landed here' some 'three hundred years' ago, which provides us with spatial and temporal deixis; we now know that this island has a historical past (the third text world), and within that text world this character also wrote a book which suggests a possible fourth text world. This fourth text world can only be possible because, at this point at least, there is no further information or evidence, however this also suggests that the third text world, the world of Donnelly, may also be a possible world as this fragment provides no evidence that this person existed. The first and second text worlds are on a somewhat firmer footing as the gameworld audiovisual setting provides the user with a veracity matched by the

narrative fragment.

Where we saw in the first fragment of script A a recounting of events that had recently happened to the narrator as he was washed ashore, this fragment from script B which is also the first that users may be presented with at the beginning, presents a more descriptive account of the island and some reflection from the narrator. The narrator also uses some epistemic modality as he makes sense of the island ('seem', 'perhaps') which suggests reflection and offers some insight into the narrator's character as someone who 'noticed' natural features around the island which reinforces the assumption that he has considerable familiarity with the island.

Again, as with figure 7, contingency is illustrated by overlapping circles. This fragment also features Donnelly's world (TW₃) which is connected by location and not truly contingent²² upon the narrator's world.

²² If Donnelly exists within the larger storyworld of *Dear Esther* and not a figment of the narrator's imagination then there is no contingency upon the narrator's text worlds. However, if he were imagined by the narrator then there would be contingency on the narrator's mind but not upon the previous text worlds of the gulls visiting or avoiding the island.

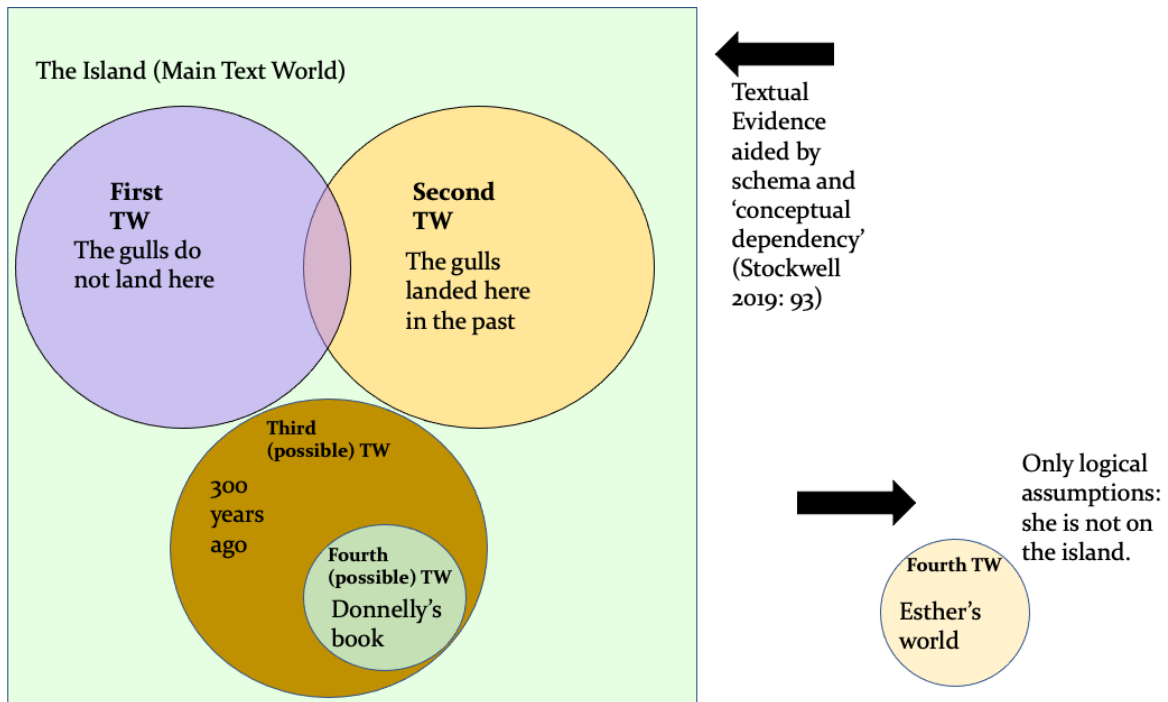


Figure 18: The text world of Dear Esther, fragment 1, text B

Script C

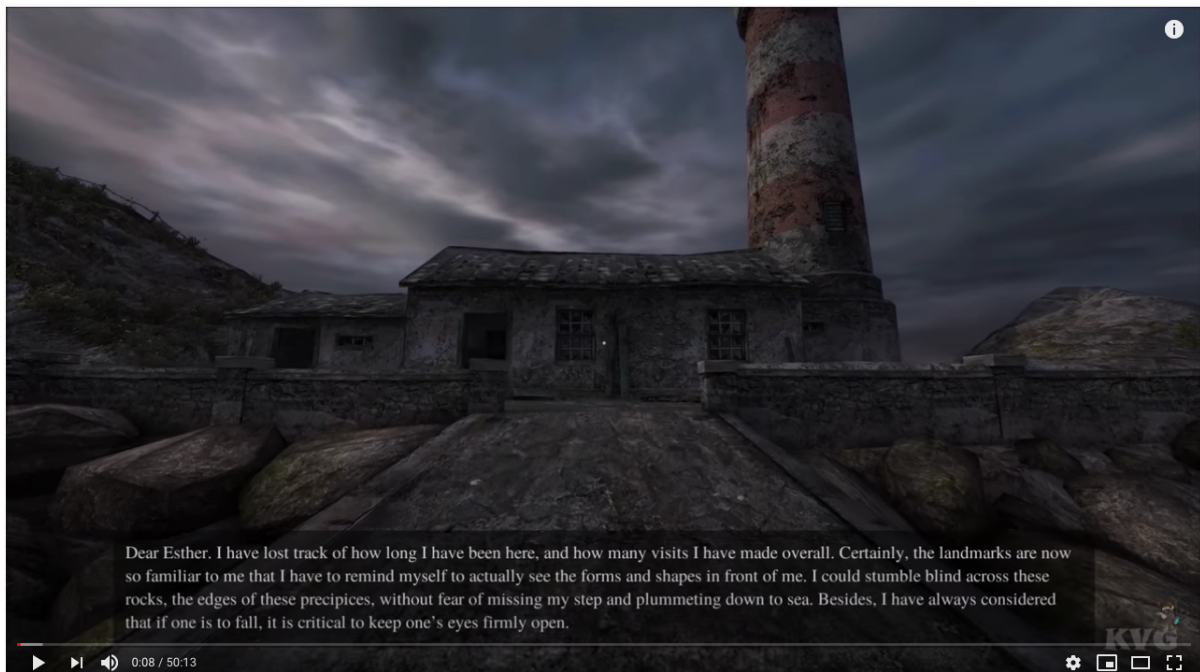


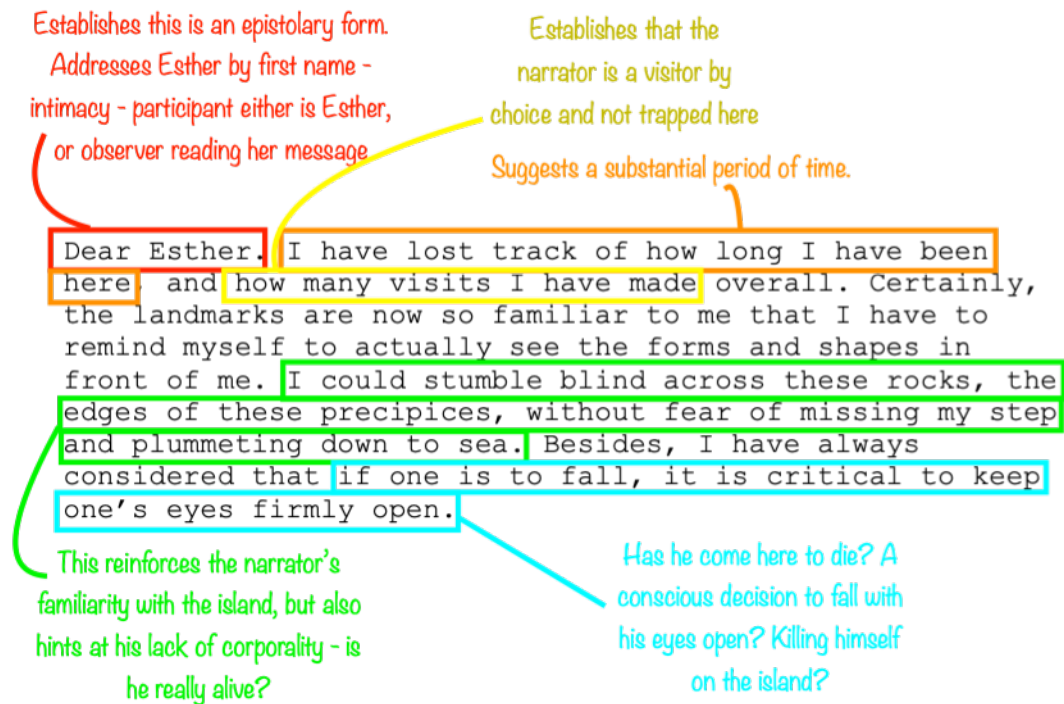
Figure 19: *Dear Esther* Fragment 1 Script C screenshot

Figure 20: Fragment 1 Script C stylistic analysis

Script C's opening scene again begins by addressing Esther and then places the reader into the primary text world of 'here', again anchored by the gameworld setting of the island. This second sentence also suggests a second text world where the narrator has visited the island before, and this also offers an alternative arrival story as it suggests he has not been shipwrecked as script A does, but instead he is a willing visitor. However,

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7znGkAoYog> [Accessed 01/01/2018]

this script does not make it clear if the narrator is able to leave and instead the ambiguous deictic 'long' leaves the reader to make assumptions that it is a considerable time he has been on the island and thus must be somehow trapped.

A third text world is suggested in the narrator's familiarity with the island in the times he no longer sees the 'forms and shapes', but this is not the secondary text world of previous trips as the deictic 'now' reminds the reader that this is within the present visit. A fourth possible text world is also suggested by the second half of this fragment where it begins with the modal 'I could', and thus establishing this is a possibility where the narrator could fall. Interestingly, despite the heightened register suggesting danger ('stumble', 'precipices', 'plummeting'), there is no mention of the outcome of this possible fate, and instead the narrator says he would keep his 'eyes firmly open'. This attitude to personal safety finds a similar echo in script A which suggests that these elements of dangerous recklessness are seeded here in the very first fragment if the user chances upon script A or C.

In this text world diagram, the narrator has three experienced worlds (his current stay, previous visits, and times during his current stay when he must remind himself to 'see' the island). The fourth text world is not

entirely contingent upon the other text worlds because it is modal (I could) and does not require the previous visits as anyone could fall from the precipices on their first visit.

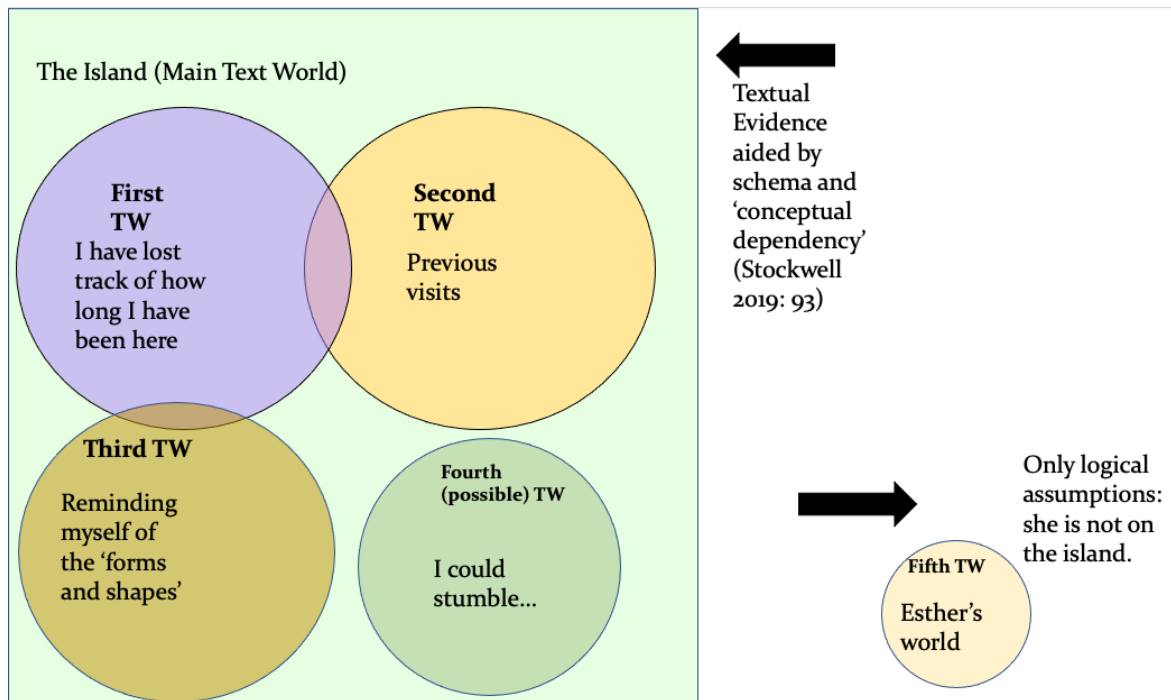


Figure 21: The text world of Dear Esther, fragment 1, text C

Script D

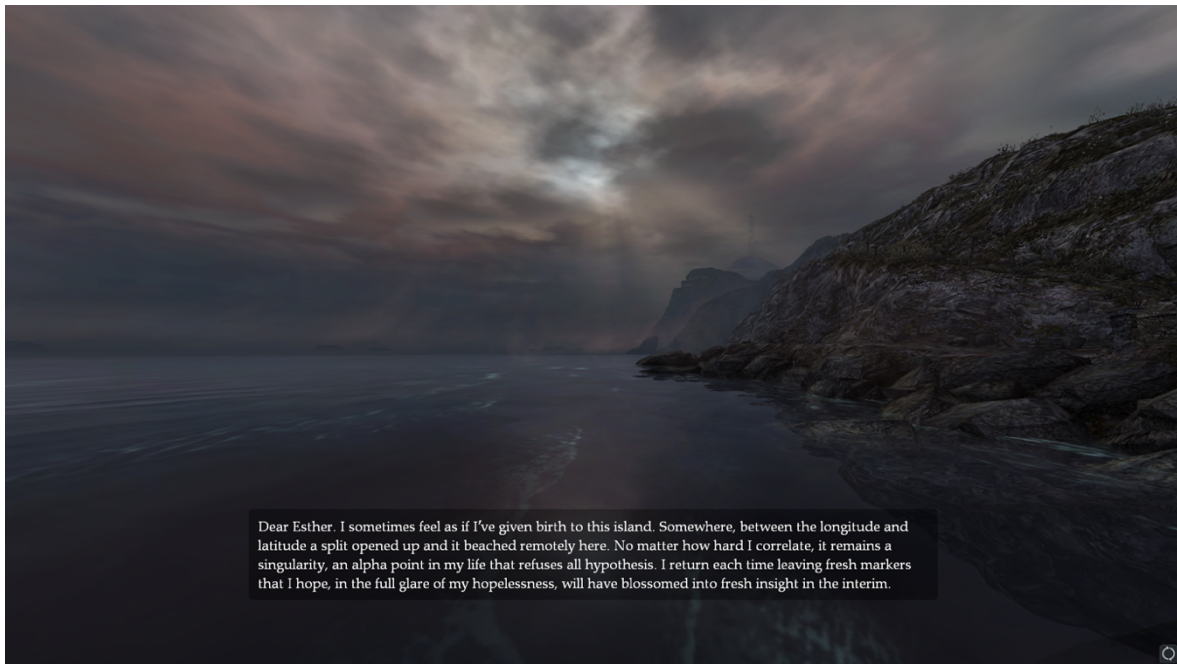


Figure 22: *Dear Esther* Fragment 1 Script D screenshot

Establishes this is an epistolary form. Addresses Esther by first name - intimacy - participant either is Esther, or observer reading her message

This suggests that the narrator believes he may have imagined the island and perhaps he is unconscious or dead.

Dear Esther. I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude a split opened up and it beached remotely here. No matter how hard I correlate, it remains a singularity, an alpha point in my life that refuses all hypothesis. I return each time leaving fresh markers that I hope, in the full glare of my hopelessness, will have blossomed into fresh insight in the interim.

He is unable to make sense of this place, reinforcing his suggestion that it is an imagined space.

This suggests intertextual references to the film 'Groundhog Day', or the Greek myth of Sisyphus, as well as the obvious suggestion that he visits the 'real' island repeatedly which is mentioned in the other texts.

Figure 23: Fragment 1 Script D stylistic analysis

Of all the opening texts script D is the most complex as the narrator reflects upon his past and present. Throughout this fragment a complex and heightened scientific register is employed: ‘correlate’, ‘singularity’, ‘hypothesis’, ‘insight’, ‘interim’, ‘alpha point’. This suggests that the narrator may have a scientific background, and indeed once the user moves into the buildings located beneath the lighthouse in this opening setting, scientific formulae are evident graffitied on the walls reinforcing this supposition. This fragment also offers the most text worlds which also adds to its complexity. Again, it begins with Esther’s world which remains, as with the others, separate and apart from the narrator’s world as he is writing letters to her. Then this text offers a possible world that is temporally ‘sometimes’, and also deictically ‘somewhere’ and further created in the narrator’s imagination with the deontic modal ‘feel’. This text world resembles a whale ‘given birth to’ yet retains its island nature within the hint of a large floundering mammal ‘beached’, and this reinforces the complexity of this fragment and finds echoes in script A where the narrator recounts being washed ashore.

In keeping with the narrator’s complex reflections, the third sentence suggests a second (or more) text world(s) where he has previously spent time thinking about his past (‘No matter how hard I correlate’). This leads

us to the third text world of the narrator's past, simply referred to as 'it'; this event, the user later learns is the core of *Dear Esther* and is where Esther was killed. A fourth text world is also created here, and it is unclear if it is set on the island ('I return', 'leaving fresh markers') or imagined by the narrator; certainly, later visual evidence is found around the gameworld of the island where lit candles provide 'markers'. However, the introspection suggested by 'hopelessness' and 'insight' suggest this is an imagined journey as the narrator reflects upon 'it', the 'singularity' found in the third text world. This hope, found in the final sentence also offers a fifth text world, again denoted by its modality to be an imagined world where the narrator can finally find 'insight'.

This final text world diagram shows that it is unclear of the location of each text world, and how only the second and third, and fourth and fifth are contingent upon each other.

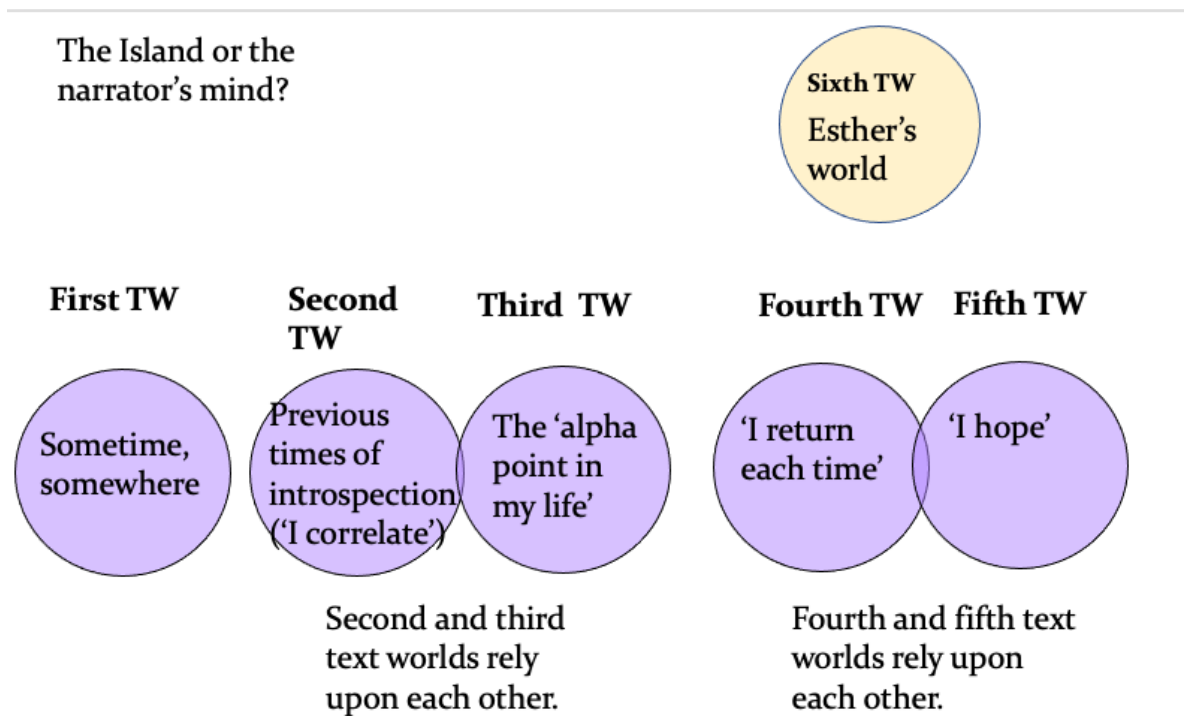


Figure 24: The text world of *Dear Esther*, fragment 1, text D

These multiple overlapping text worlds underline the complexity of text D's first narrative fragment and cue the reader/player's schema for a more complex literary type experience rather than one commonly found in videogames. This text, in particular, also bears rereading for a non-spontaneous interpretation and thus a 'unity' (Furlong 2008: 289) of that interpretation, in the same way that a literary text offers.

Having now examined the Walking Simulator artefact itself we can turn to the Steam gamer forum for *Dear Esther* to see how posters report their experiences of interaction with this title.

7.3 Attention

We established in the previous chapter that markers of deep attention might be long durations of interaction with the *Walking Simulator* title and as they offer no hyperattention because there is no threat or challenge and instead users can attend to any information at their own pace, thus encouraging deep attention. If the search term ‘hour’ is applied to the entire forum 53 entries are flagged with a mix of discussion about the story and some posts regarding technical problems and complaints about the brevity of experience offered. The following thread on the topic of most hours spent in *Dear Esther* provides interesting insight into the perception of the literary nature of the title and suggests deep attention from each of the users who comment.

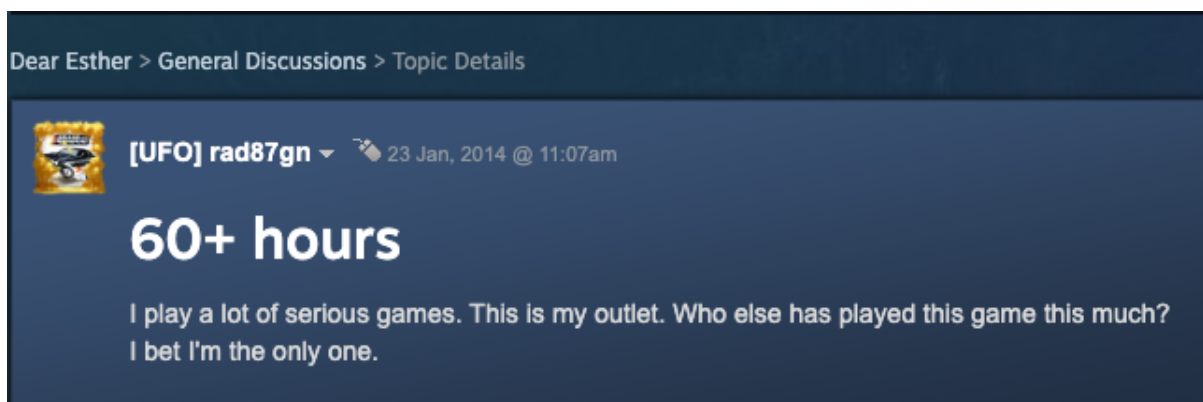


Figure 25: Steam comment ([UFO] rad87gn 2014)


In this post user [UFO] rad87gn establishes their credentials as a ‘true’

gamer (Paaßen et al (2017: 421), Kuittinen et al. (2007: 106)) which is someone (generally male) who plays ‘serious games’ rather than someone playing casually²⁴. This post takes an assertive stance more common to traditional videogames and the time invested in gaining the necessary skills. *Dear Esther* does not require any videogaming skills, because it has no true game elements, yet this user refers to it as a game and insists they are the winner of a competition for most hours ‘played’. However, the responses are largely playful, make reference to the story, and include emoticons that infer supportive attitudes in contrast to the original post.

²⁴ ‘Casual games’ are an established genre of videogames most commonly played on mobile phones as apps and often resemble real world card games as well as simple matching games (*Candy Crush, Jewel Crush*) or target games (*Angry Birds, Bubble Shooter*). These games require very little time investment to gain skills and are easily picked up.

Showing 1-15 of 19 comments


< 1 2 >

 **Polyphemus** ▾ 23 Jan, 2014 @ 12:04pm

I'm a long way behind you. Only 36 hours.

T: -)

#1

 **lllglb** ▾ 23 Jan, 2014 @ 7:38pm


Originally posted by **Toadflax**:

I'm a long way behind you. Only 36 hours.

T: -)

Half way anyway, come on you can reach him :D
 I'm far behind, i prefer to taste at little pace, just a playtrought sometimes when i'm in the right mood, i don't want to get used to the feels the game provide.
 Just like some good wine, sip it gently instead of drink dip all of it (Jackobson references are casual)


#2

 **Polyphemus** ▾ 23 Jan, 2014 @ 8:45pm

How can I catch him with no bottom in my boat?


T: -)

#3

 **lllglb** ▾ 23 Jan, 2014 @ 8:54pm

Fill your stomach with stones ;)

#4

 **Polyphemus** ▾ 23 Jan, 2014 @ 9:33pm

I'm fairly sure that would sink me even faster. Better to turn into a seagull. But something about that seems a bit, well, final...

T: -)

#5

Figure 26: Steam comment responses to user [UFO] rad87gn (1)

The response from user lllglb suggests they have experienced a literary attention type with *Dear Esther* as they describe wanting to interact slowly ('to taste at little pace'). Their post also suggests revisiting similar

to rereading for ‘comfort’ rather than for understanding: ‘i don’t want to get used to the feels the game provide’. The references made by both users Polyphemus and lllglb show they have familiarity with the storyworld (‘no bottom in my boat’, ‘Fill your stomach with stones’) gained from a more literary type of engagement with *Dear Esther* because both comments are to be found in the narrative. The gameworld visuals show both a boat and stones but because this is a Walking Simulator it is impossible to interact with these elements and therefore the only foregrounding is provided by the text and strongly suggests a readerly deep attention on the part of these users.

7.4 Immersion

Transportation immersion of the types suggested by Ryan (2015: 85-114) of spatial, spatio-temporal, temporal, and emotional as explored and defined previously are evident in user comments within the forum to varying degrees with emotional being the most reported. This is an important point here, the lack of evidence for immersion types aside from emotional

does not suggest it has not been experienced by users of *Dear Esther* but rather that they have not reported it on the forums.

Evidence of spatial immersion among users of the Steam forum for *Dear Esther* can be found in discussions on the verisimilitude of the setting gained from the audio-visual elements of the gameworld.

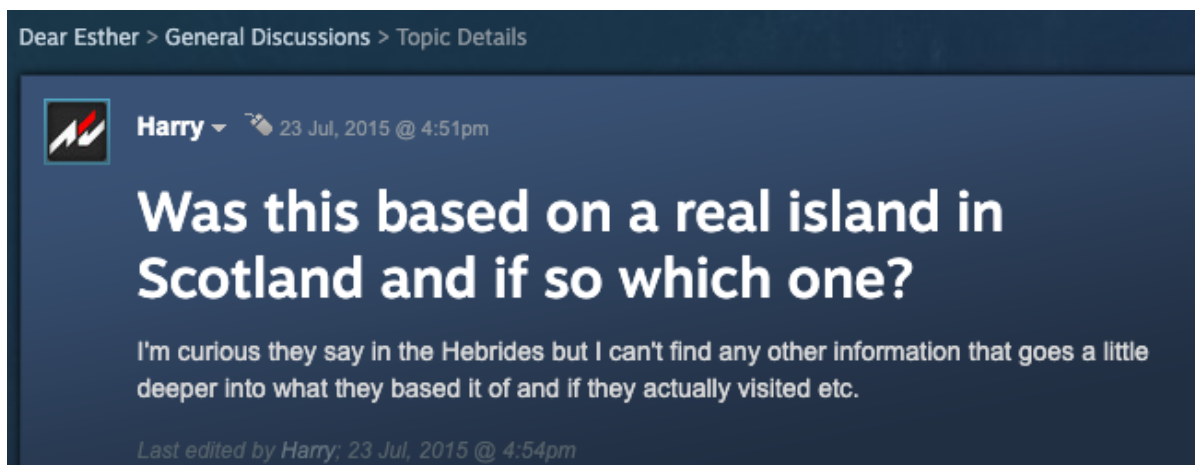



Figure 27: Steam comment (Harry 2015)

From Harry's comment it is logical to conclude that they found the onscreen setting of *Dear Esther* realistic and the comments that followed this offered practical advice with links to interviews and other information that established where the developers had gained their inspiration. On the other hand, user Kaffeebohnson comments that the depiction of the moon in *Dear Esther* rather than aiding their spatial immersion instead hinders it because of its lack of verisimilitude:

 Kaffebohnsen ▾ 18 Feb, 2014 @ 12:20pm


The only thing I didn't like was the moon.

It's too big! Cartoonishly huge! Monkey-Island Remake Size!


The beach environments looked hyperrealistic, but the huge moon hurt my immersion. Made me realize I am playing a game. I wish there was a mod that returned the moon to realistic proportions ;D I want it to look like this, not like a three-wolf-moon-tshirt:

http://scienceblogs.com/startswithabang/files/2010/05/2899664100086721160JrJIPT_fs.jpg


Showing 1-5 of 5 comments

 Illglb ▾ 18 Feb, 2014 @ 6:16pm

Nothing is real there, so no surprise the full moon is so big, you're closer to the sky ;) #1

 @tla ▾ 18 Feb, 2014 @ 6:53pm

I think it was meant to be big. The parallel jet trails in the sky are also thing You technically never seen it real life. #2

 [S-UK] Takendown ▾ 25 Jun, 2014 @ 9:13pm

Originally posted by @tla:

I think it was meant to be big. The parallel jet trails in the sky are also thing You technically never seen it real life.

You mean the Crepuscular Rays? You do see them in real life. #3

 sreamer17ydr ▾ 26 Jun, 2014 @ 1:27pm

I love the full moon! The Caves and Beacon levels (3 and 4) are my favorite. The audio and visuals for those levels are amazing. I get teary eyed in the moon stage, I love the night sky, and the brightness of the full moon! #4

Figure 28: Steam comments (Kaffebohnsen et al 2014)

User sreamer17ydr, the last comment in this screenshot provides us with an example of an emotional response to their spatial immersion experienced while engaging with this title as they report crying not as a direct reaction to the narrative but instead the mise-en-scène.

Emotional transportation immersion was in evidence throughout the Steam forum for *Dear Esther* with a great many posts featuring descriptions of empathetic, or personally experienced emotional responses, but very few subjective responses to the narrator and characters. This post from user Aellon shows one of the rare subjective responses to the narrator and his reliability:

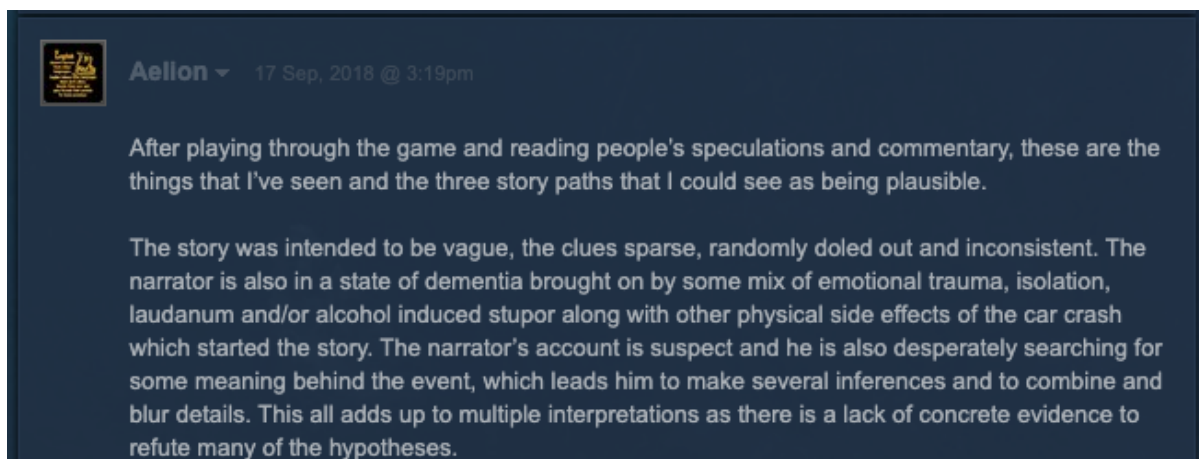


Figure 29: Steam comment (Aellon 2018)

This user asserts that the 'narrator's account is suspect' and adds a number of possible reasons for this. While this provides some evidence for an emotionally subjective response, it is perhaps more revealing as an

example of a commentary a reader may make after rereading a literary text to induce non-spontaneous interpretation and create a 'unity' of meaning in the narration which provides the most plausible reading to the exclusion of all others which have been investigated (Furlong 2008: 289). This comment from Aellon also suggests the literary technique of unreliable narration which also suggests this user has approached *Dear Esther* as an artefact with literary elements.

Despite users not reporting many subjective emotional reactions towards the narrator as he recounts his story in *Dear Esther*, this does not suggest users have experienced a lack of emotional immersion. The foregrounding of an ambiguous and often poetic narration, as we saw within the storyworld section above, lends itself to user interpretation and personal readings (Colthup 2018: 123), the type of which is more commonly (but not exclusively) found in literary texts.

Empathetic emotional responses suggesting emotional transportation immersion are more evident within the *Dear Esther* forums. The following post from user Apocalypse Email (2015) describes their personal life and the trauma experienced which was then echoed upon the screen in *Dear Esther*:



Apocalypse Email ▾ 8 Oct, 2015 @ 7:59pm

(SPOILERS)My Theories about Dear Esther and my Experience with it

This is one of my favorite works of interactive literature. I hesitate to call it a game, but the story on it's own is still quite good.

Dear Esther is a wonderful cautionary tale about grief and obsession. Grief is a powerful emotion, one that is a vital part of the human experience. Losing a loved one is a moment we will all deal with someday. It's tempting to hold on to that grief because it can feel like you are letting go of the person if you let the grief go. This is a dangerous urge. You have to heal, to accept what's happened and move on. If you don't that grief will eat you alive.

I first played Dear Esther just after my mother died. I wasn't in a good place then. I really had hit rock bottom and if my two best friends hadn't moved in with me for 2 months, I probably would have killed myself. It spoke to me on a deeply personal level. Sometimes I thought the Narrator was stealing the thoughts right out of my head.

Now on the theories.

Figure 30: Steam comment (Apocalypse Email 2015)

A deep association with *Dear Esther* is perhaps to be expected if users have recently suffered the loss of a close friend or relation, and the forum member, describes the empathy experienced. The story of *Dear Esther* is that of a male narrator who is suffering from the loss of his wife, Esther, as revealed in the first section of spoken narration in the lighthouse, 'I have heard it said that human ashes make great fertilizer, that we could sow a great forest from all that is left of your hips and ribcage' (Pinchbeck and Morgan 2012)²⁵. Throughout the narrator recounts common expressions of

²⁵ . The entire script with all the alternative versions is available here - https://dearesther.fandom.com/wiki/Dear_Esther_Script [Accessed 01/06/2016]

grief; expecting to see Esther when he returns home, anticipating her sitting up even though he is viewing her body in a mortuary, remembering happier times together, and so on. This user, Apocalypse Email, recounts a deep identification *with* the narrator which suggests a more literary emotional transportation immersion rather than feeling as if they were the narrator as one might in a traditional videogame where the immersion is achieved by flow. This supports Keen's (2006: 216) suggestion that empathy is activated in readers by character identification as this user reports feeling as if the narrator was taking 'the thoughts right out of my head'. This also merges into Ryan's category of emotions felt for oneself (2015: 110) as Apocalypse Email's personal grief has coalesced with the narrator's.

In a thread discussing whether *Dear Esther* was scary user Mendacious Calamity reports an unusual example of emotional transportation immersion for themselves where they have drawn a personal real-life fear into the virtual onscreen world which suggests that even in a 'game' environment this individual acted as they would in the real world and they are truly emotionally immersed:

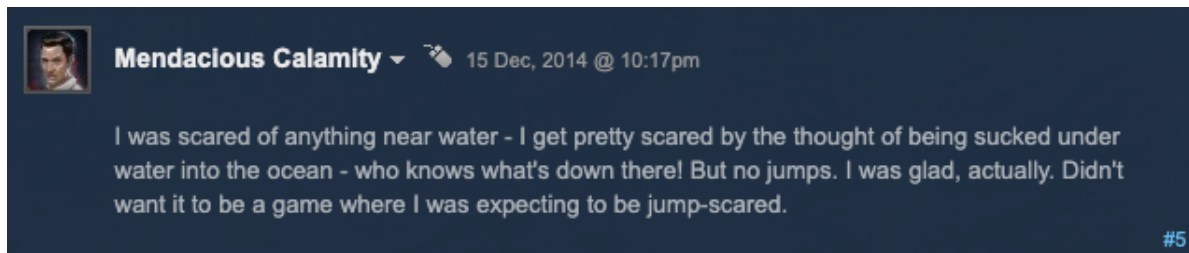


Figure 31: Steam comment (Mendacious Calamity 2014)

This type of emotional immersion felt for oneself, a physical fear, is not expected within traditional videogames where onscreen avatars may climb tall buildings, fly, take leaps off high points, and often defy the rules of real-world physics while remaining unscathed. We might perhaps see this type of emotional immersion for videogame players experiencing a horror game, but *Dear Esther* is melancholy rather than suspenseful. Instead, here the poster has experienced a world that brought to mind their schemas of water sufficiently to induce their real-world fears which suggests a deep level of transportation immersion. It also suggests a complete deictic shift that we would more commonly see in traditional videogames as the poster describes themselves as being within the gameworld - 'I was scared of anything near water' - thus they have not had an audience experience where the events happen to the characters as we would with reading or viewing stories, but rather they perceive themselves to be present within the onscreen virtual world. This is counter to the previous post that describe their personal emotional

experiences as being more similar to that we would expect to see from reading or viewing audiences who would describe an overall experience rather than a deictic shift into the storyworld or gameworld as this individual has. This does not imply that either comment is somehow 'wrong', but rather that, in the case of *Dear Esther* at least, this Walking Simulator allows users to either make a deictic shift into the onscreen gameworld as one might with a traditional videogame, but it also offers a more readerly or literary audience experience for participants, thus suggesting that this genre is able to perform both functions.

Throughout the 60 selected posts the word 'experience' or 'experienced' is repeated 13 times with only one of those referring to the characters, the remaining 12 uses refer to the posters own feelings of *Dear Esther* in totality. User Samurai_Gerbil calls their experience 'mesmerising' (2014):



Samurai_Gerbil ▾ 7 Jun, 2014 @ 10:45pm

Heard a lot of hype about this - here's what I think!

Had been intrigued with this "game" for some time. Having played and liked *Gone Home*, I thought it might be a similar kind of atmospheric game. But read some reviews where people called it boring and pointless. I'm into this kind of artsy stuff but to a certain limit only! At the point when art starts to become self-indulgent I get put off, be it films, books or games. So basically, was on the fence about buying it and finally couldn't resist picking it up for very cheap as part of a Humble Bundle.

Dear Esther had been sitting in my library for a while now. I had a few hours to kill today so finally decided to check it out. First 10-15 mins, I was like "Uhh...this is going to be a little boring. Where do I have to go? There are so many paths and routes. Is there any marker or any maps to show me the way? Do I just stare at the vast ocean and the foliage throughout the game? This is confusing!" I have to admit that initially I was beginning to see what all those bad reviews by gamers meant about it being just a walking simulator.

Even so, an hour later I found myself still playing and completely in awe of the game's atmosphere especially the gorgeous cave section. And the music...oh god, the music is mindblowing! I think its the music that really sets the mood for this game. In fact, its not really a game in my opinion...its a journey...a piece of interactive art. If you go in expecting to play a game...you will hate it! But if you let yourself be taken in by the environment its trying to create for you...you will have a mesmerising experience.

And I cant get that hauntingly beautiful soundtrack out of my head. And the part where you fall into the water and see images of a motorway and a couple of cars...that part blew my mind! Its just done so well. The detailing, the character building, the lighting, the environments...its pure art!

Bottomline, I know many people thought of it as pointless and a waste of time - but I really enjoyed it. I would like to try out some similar stuff and am open to recommendations. The *Stanley Parable* is next on my list...that demo I played was just fantastic!

Figure 32: Steam comment (Samurai_Gerbil 2014)

This forum member, among others has recognised this as an experience which has affected them emotionally, and one post (20.1 in the appendix) goes so far as to call it life changing. Undoubtedly these individuals have

had a deeply resonant experience exploring the onscreen world of *Dear Esther*. These comments tell us that *Dear Esther* has given rise to an immersion which is transportation immersion akin to reading prose fiction or watching drama, these posters are reporting deep involvement and empathy, which is seen in traditional literary experiences.

7.5 Deictic Shift

In the previous chapter in section 5.4.3 we looked at the possible types of deictic shift that may be experienced with Walking Simulators and suggested that the use of a first person (I) recounting of events in the comments would show a more active *ludic* shift generally associated with videogames, and a third person (s/he, they) would suggest a passive or semi-passive *literary* shift.

Forum user EdmeXIII (Alex) uses second and third person address interchangeably suggesting that the deictic shift or spatiotemporal transportation immersion is perhaps more nuanced in Walking Simulators and they do in fact sit between text and game:



Figure 33: Steam comment (EdmeXIII (Alex) 2016)

What is of note here is the strange separation between poster and character as both 'your character' is used alongside 'he'. For this participant the main character is not their onscreen avatar, yet the character is not entirely a separate entity as we would expect to see in a discussion about literary characters (of prose fiction or drama). Arguably,

in this post the poster is echoing the unfixed nature of address used throughout *Dear Esther* which I have previously discussed (Colthup 2018) as the multiple uses of second person address (you) in the narrative fragments suggest multiple ambiguous storyworlds (2018: 127).

Likewise, user 86themadhatter has a particularly interesting comment where they shift between being player and reader and illustrates how *Dear Esther* offers a complex deictic experience that has resulted in an unresolved interpretation of the narrative:

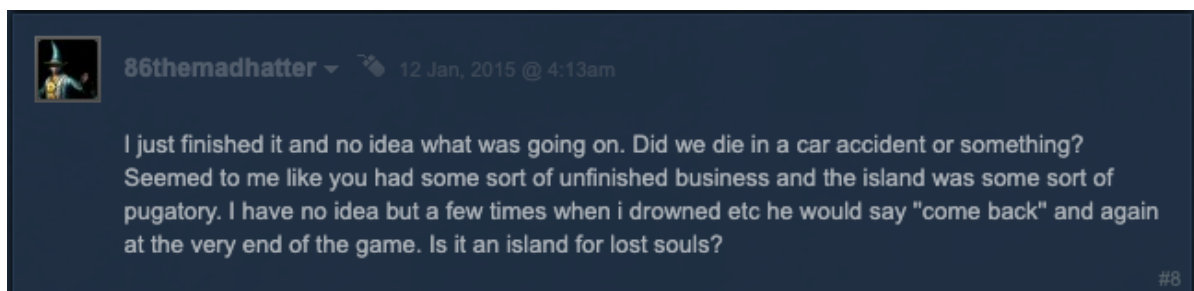


Figure 34: Steam comment (86themadhatter 2015)

The use of 'we', then 'you', 'I', and 'he' suggests that 86themadhatter is uncertain whether they are being represented by an avatar onscreen and have made a *ludic* deictic shift from their real world into the onscreen world while retaining the appearance of agency as is familiar to videogame players ('we', 'you', 'I'), or whether they are the audience watching the story unfold ('he') and are thus experiencing a *literary* passive or semi-passive deictic shift.

In this post from user Paragon the comment describes the narrator as a separate entity to themselves, thus suggesting that no embodied videogame deictic shift has taken place as we would expect to see in a traditional videogame, but rather like a literary experience Paragon has remained a passive viewer. Being a viewer, or the audience, as one would in a literary experience is reinforced by Paragon's use of literary terminology as they suggest 'the island is a metaphor'.

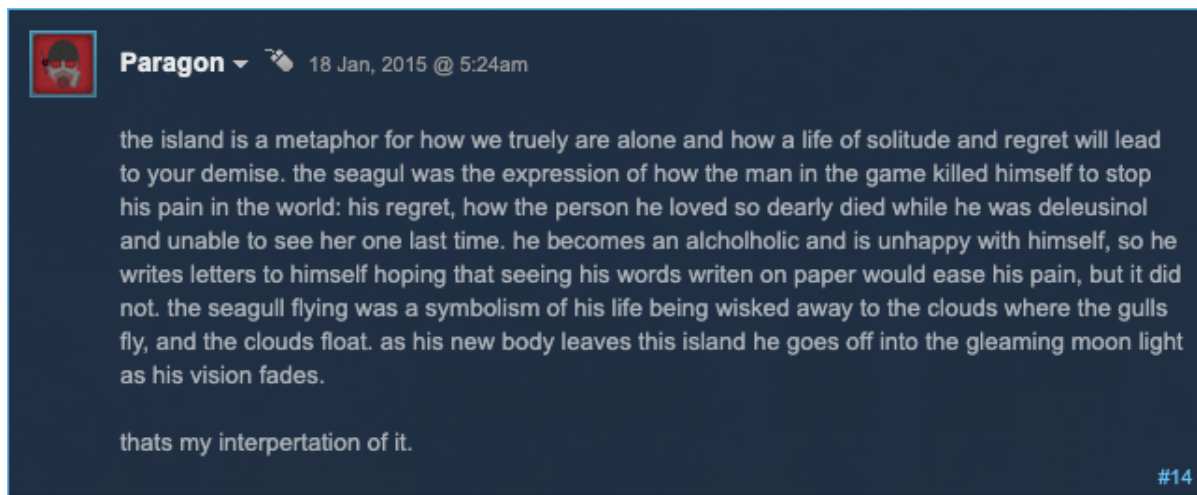


Figure 35: Steam comment (Paragon 2015)

This post from user Sahdow provides an excellent example of how a literary shift (as they mention being 'with the narrator') still affords an affecting experience which suggests deep emotional immersion.



Figure 36: Steam comment (Sahdow 2018)

The comment that 'I feel like I left myself somewhere in this game with the narrator' provides a very accurate description of the deictic shift necessary to experience emotional transportation and immersion because on returning from that experience the user has 'left' themselves 'somewhere' which suggests that the world of *Dear Esther* is a geographical space as deictic language of 'somewhere' implies not here within the user's real world, and to have 'left' themselves they must have journeyed to this place. For this user 'moving' cognitively is already established as they begin by mentioning their mental health and how that involves a cognitive shift 'into a really dark place'. What is particularly interesting from their comments is how the shift has been not only undertaken by Sahdow but also elements of the visual gameworld have moved into their mind as they 'can't ever seem to get...out of my head'

and this would appear to support Koopman's suggestion (2015: 19) that readers often seek out 'sad' narratives while experiencing sadness within their lives. It is clear here that deictic shift is aided by emotional transportation; when we are deeply immersed, we move cognitively to the virtual space provided by the gameworld of a Walking Simulator in the same way that we might with a literary text.

7.6 Schema

We discussed in section 6.4.4 that schema activation and refreshment may be evident in two ways in forum posts: those posts describing personal memories being evoked by the storyworld and gameworld and thus aiding user immersion and engagement; or those asserting and discussing the Walking Simulator genre and rejecting or allowing a refreshment or replacement to the user's existing schema of videogames (or literary texts).

This post from user EvilSooty999 illustrates how their personal memories were evoked by engagement with *Dear Esther*.

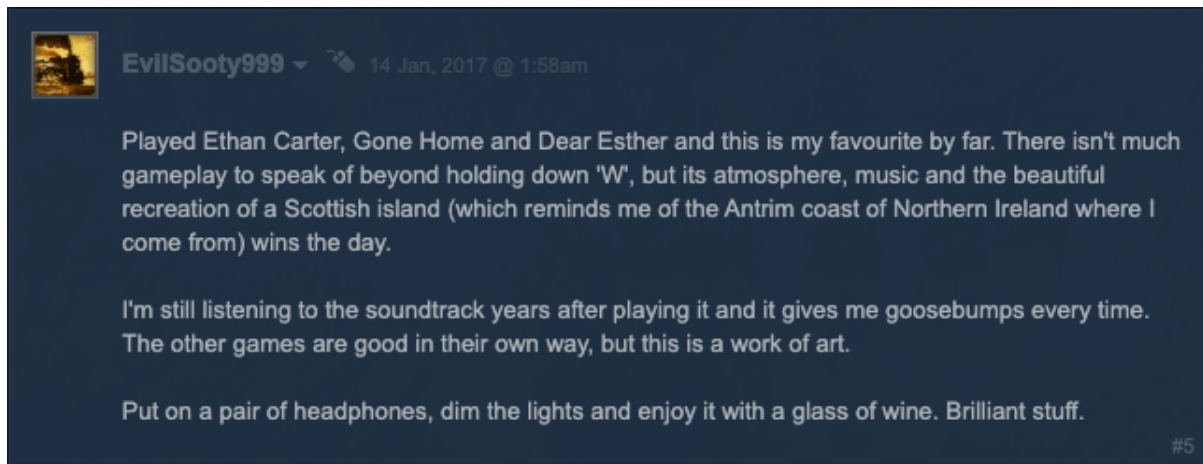


Figure 37: Steam comment (EvilSooty999 2017)

The user, EvilSooty999, shows through their use of ‘recreation’ and ‘reminds’ how their personal schemas have been enacted to bring to mind a real place brought about by not a real island or coastline (as watching a film or looking at photographs might have done) but by a created gameworld visual. This comment also (usefully, for our purposes) excludes a more gamerly type of immersion activated by EvilSooty999’s schema as they mention the lack of ‘gameplay’. It may be the case that, as McIntyre (2008: 313) suggests the concert of audio-visual representations of setting aid immersion in audiences of drama, and this can also be applied to Walking Simulators.

Schema refreshment or rejection of the Walking Simulator genre elicited by *Dear Esther* is considerably more evident within the Steam forum, as this post shows:

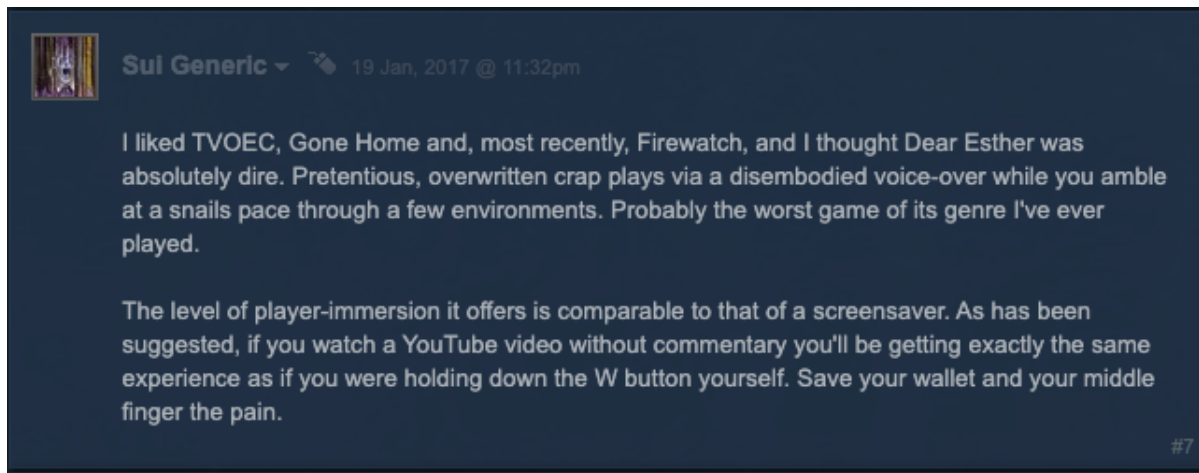


Figure 38: Steam comment (Sul Generic 2017)

While user Sul Generic's comments on the Walking Simulator genre are mixed, and very negative about *Dear Esther*, it does illustrate how schema refreshment is nuanced and not at all uniform with the development of new genres. Sul Generic maintains *Dear Esther* and other Walking Simulators (*The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *Gone Home*, and *Firewatch*) are games to be played and not an experience sharing literary elements. This is reinforced by their reference to YouTube which could suggest a filmic experience that would have elements of drama and thus literariness. By the use of the term 'player-immersion' it is also underlined that this user is not simply rejecting any expansion of their schema based upon lack of conformity to previous videogame experiences, but rather that *Dear Esther* does not offer enough engagement for Sul Generic, and that lack of engagement is brought about by lack of appropriate challenge. This also illustrates Furlong's (2008: 287) point about challenge being a necessary element of engagement even with literary texts that require no

kinetic input, yet it would appear that Sul Generic regards some form of physical interaction beyond 'holding down the W button' for a satisfactory gaming experience, and thus their schema has not been refreshed to include *Dear Esther* as a videogame.

7.7 Revisiting: Non-Spontaneous and Non-cumulative Interpretations

We saw in 4.4.2 that literary texts offer two forms of rereading to their audiences; one of non-spontaneous interpretation where the reader will reread to arrive at a unified understanding of the text that excludes all other possible interpretations; or that of non-cumulative rereading which is also commonly referred to as comfort reading which is undertaken for the pleasure of re-experiencing the storyworld without seeking new or additional interpretations. Within the 60 posts examined 21 contain and largely focus upon providing interpretation and repeat terms like, 'that's my interpretation of it', 'Meaning IMO'²⁶, 'I interpreted that as', 'My

²⁶ This is a commonly used piece of Internet shorthand meaning In My Opinion.

guess', 'I think', and many mention their 'theory' as to what happened in the story.

If we first return to user Polyphemus within the thread on how many hours users have spent on *Dear Esther*, they provide useful insight into their dual purpose for interaction with this Walking Simulator; this user is revisiting for both non-cumulative *and* non-spontaneous interpretations, but as we can see from their comment it is the non-cumulative that provides contentment, yet is put aside for the thrill of intrigue provided by the narrative:



Figure 39: Steam comment (Polyphemus 2014)

Polyphemus describes revisiting to enjoy the beauty of *Dear Esther* which suggests a revisiting for non-cumulative or 'comfort' reading. The second type of revisiting undertaken by this user is for exploration of the 'intriguing' elements which points towards a non-spontaneous interpretation of a readerly type, despite their reference to 'cheating'. The

cheating Polyphemus refers to is mentioned in an earlier post within this thread where they reveal having used a cheat-code to be able to access the entire gameworld at any point. Despite the term 'cheating' being used here this is a similar approach that might be taken by a reader with a book where they are searching for references or literary motifs, and the necessity of a cheat-code is related to the technical nature of Walking Simulators being digital artefacts rather than an analogue form like a book.

Fish suggested in *Interpreting the Variorum*, (1976: 467) that ambiguity rather than a canonic reading is part of the 'delights of recreation', and this would appear to be what we see in the comments made about *Dear Esther*. Members actively seek out alternative readings, confirmation of their own conclusions, and open collaborative discussion in the same way that readers of literature have (hence, our description of these forums as '21st-century literary salons') and continue to do so in groups that Fish would describe as 'interpretive communities' (1976: 484) – again, directly characteristic of literary reading.

While interpretive posts deal with the story and plot of *Dear Esther*, some of them go further and use language and terminology associated with literary analysis. The table below shows the spread of this type of

language:

| | | |
|-----------------|----|---|
| Magical realism | 1 | |
| Metaphor | 5 | |
| Symbolism | 1 | |
| Narrator | 72 | |
| Personification | 1 | |
| Analogy | 1 | |
| Represent | 10 | |
| Catharsis | 2 | |
| Consciousness | 4 | (stream of consciousness, subconscious, etc.) |
| Character | 20 | |
| Interactive | 7 | (interactive literature, interactive film) |
| Nonlinear | 1 | |

| | | |
|----------------|----|--|
| Art | 7 | |
| Interpretation | 10 | |

Table 6: Literary language found in *Dear Esther* Steam forum

As we can see in this table, the word 'narrator' is the most commonly used literary term, and this is important because narrators are associated with stories and storytelling, not experiences had within a videogame setting.

The members of the *Dear Esther* Steam forum are not discussing their gameplay, which is what we might expect to see on this type of forum, but instead they discuss character, interpretation, the narrator, and so on.

It is also important to note that many of the posts interpreting the narrative were deliberately collaborative in nature with requests of feedback or positive affirmation, the following exchange happening in one thread between forum members:

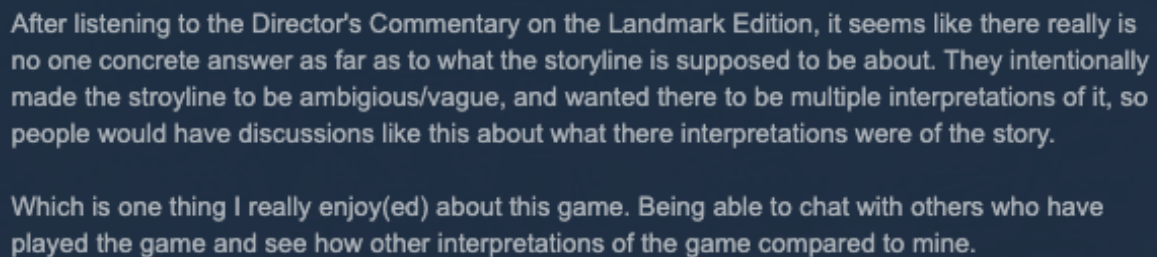


Figure 40: Steam comments (EdmeXIII (Alex), Yuck Babe! 2016)

The entire thread is 22 posts long (including the original message) and has been written to allow the OP²⁷ to both share their interpretation of the story and gain feedback from others in this collaborative process to make sense of their experience. The final post in the thread, post 21, ties up the discussion and shows how for this poster the sharing process was

²⁷ Commonly used shorthand on forums meaning Original Poster.

intrinsic to their enjoyment:



After listening to the Director's Commentary on the Landmark Edition, it seems like there really is no one concrete answer as far as to what the storyline is supposed to be about. They intentionally made the stroyline to be ambigious/vague, and wanted there to be multiple interpretations of it, so people would have discussions like this about what there interpretations were of the story.

Which is one thing I really enjoy(ed) about this game. Being able to chat with others who have played the game and see how other interpretations of the game compared to mine.

#21

Figure 41: Steam comments (EdmeXIII (Alex) 2016)

This final post to the thread also illustrates how user EdmeXIII (Alex) is continuing to revisit *Dear Esther* as they mention 'enjoy(ed)' which suggests past and ongoing experiences of the title, and the interpretative nature is integral for them. This supports Fish's arguments about interpretive communities offering a proof of membership by agreement, and to put forward a wildly counter argument would place the individual outside of that community, as we see in this thread where the original post suggests that posters are a seagull:



Figure 42: Steam comments (buggyjug 2014)

Where we might expect the community response to be ignoring this post

as it transgresses the more serious nature of the other commenters by offering a bizarre explanation, instead we see that there are 28 responses to this thread with division and support for the OP:

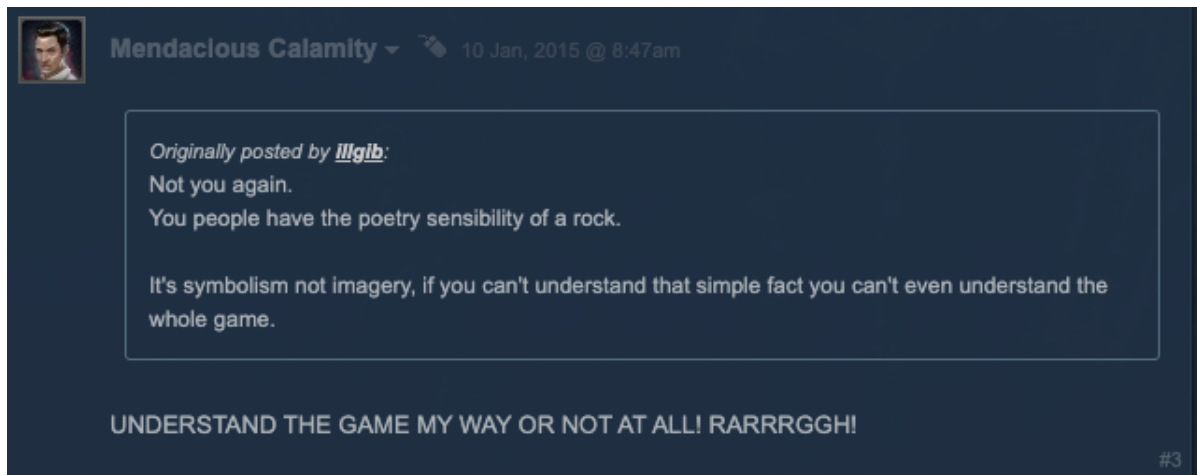


Figure 43: Steam comments (Mendacious Calamity 2015)

This online discussion forum for (ostensibly, at least amongst members) a videogame, yet those members are displaying behaviour that Fish attributes to interpretive communities of literature (Fish 1980). There are differing interpretations to be made about the story *Dear Esther* and there are also collaborative efforts being made by members to reach an agreed understanding of the language and events. This is what is anticipated by Reader Response research (Whiteley and Canning (2017), Whiteley (2011), Bell et al. (2018), Swann and Allington (2009), Peplow (2016)), and here we see it displayed in videogame player forums.

8.0 Firewatch

Firewatch (Campo Santo 2016) has been described as an ‘enigmatic adventure [that] offers a compelling meditation on love, loss and loneliness’ (Ditum 2016). It tells the story of Henry, a North American, white, heterosexual, middle class man met first in his late 20s when he embarks upon a relationship with Julia, a university lecturer of similar age. The prologue, told as a text branching narrative (created using Twine) follows them for fourteen years, starting in 1975 and finishing in 1989 when Julia has been diagnosed and hospitalised with early onset dementia. The main gameworld then begins with Henry spending the summer alone as a Fire Watcher in the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming where he communicates only with his manager, Delilah, via radio. During the time in the forest Henry begins to come to terms with the loss of his wife and considers embarking upon a relationship with Delilah. Like *Dear Esther* this is a first-person experience and onscreen directional movement is achieved using keyboard input (in addition to WASD there are inputs for a torch, map, to pick up some items, and similar as might be seen in a more traditional adventure videogame).

A similar approach to that of *Dear Esther* was taken, but with this title

there are only 231 discussion threads on the Steam forum, with only 23 of those threads meeting the Walking Simulator stylistics methodology criteria. 222 posts from those 23 threads were analysed, amounting to 17,508 words, and thus a larger sample of text than that of the *Dear Esther* forum.

As with *Dear Esther's* case study we will begin by examining the gameworld and storyworld of *Firewatch* before turning our attention to the forum. As with the data from *Dear Esther*, a quantitative analysis is problematic as many of the comments cover multiple references to transportation immersion, use of literary language, interpretive analysis, and reliance on personal memory schemas.

8.1 Gameworld

Firewatch presents an unusual entry into its world as it begins with a Choose Your Own Adventure style branching narrative created using Twine software, which provides only text onscreen. Despite this textual rich beginning *Firewatch* presents a more game-like proposition than

Dear Esther. The text adventure prologue sets out the events leading up to the gameworld proper of the Shoshone National Forest where the protagonist, Henry, explores the stories this Walking Simulator has to offer. There is far less reliance upon text within *Firewatch* and thus Text World Theory is of lesser use here. The prologue is broken up with short bursts of introductory game play. Close reading allows the stylistic techniques which can lead to transportation immersion within this prologue to be examined in a similar way to a piece of literary fiction, and thus recognise the features that aid this shift in the audience. The prologue is followed by days 0 and 1; both of these provide an introduction to the story and gameworld, and as such aid transportation immersion.

The gameworld structure acts as a simple container for the storyworld narrative, and most posters will have some experience and knowledge of common video game controls thus affording an activation of videogame schema in terms of modes of material interaction. The prologue presents a screen with text that requires only a simple mouse click on the red-coloured words to move onto the following screen.



Figure 44: Opening screen, Firewatch

This text adventure prologue offers a simple branching narrative, thus allowing some limited choices for the reader. The prologue - some fifty different screens interspersed at regular intervals with five small sections of introductory gameplay - features nine decision opportunities within the narrative.

The prologue provides an establishing context for Henry to go to the forest as the 'complicating action'. This first section, dominated by text, provides this backstory of the hero explaining why he has decided to come to the forest, and allows us as reader/player to experience his new world alongside him and then in the gameworld proper embodied onscreen as Henry. The prologue and first day within the main game allow Henry, as the player-reader's avatar, to learn the basics of his job

which happily connect to the demands of the gameworld control system.

The first introduction to the gameworld happens after the sixth prologue screen, some 100 or so words into the story. Onscreen a small white ring is situated in the middle of the field of vision and this acts as the focus point throughout the gameworld. As the mouse is moved so the field of vision moves but the white ring remains central. When interactive objects appear onscreen a second smaller white ring becomes visible as the focus passes over these objects and an accompanying title and mouse icon also appear alerting us to the actions we can take, if we choose to interact. The small white ring onscreen which acts as the eye focus for Henry is embodied within our character as it would be logically in real life. We are also instructed to use the left mouse button to click on interactive onscreen objects and it is clear in the first gameplay, which starts inside a lift and yet we are only able to click to pick up a rucksack and not any of the buttons to operate the lift.



Figure 45: First gameworld screenshot 1, Firewatch

This limited gameworld interaction is a common method of game designers to direct the player-reader to perform appropriate actions, and throughout *Firewatch* this is our main method of investigating the gameworld which makes it more ludic than *Dear Esther* because of these interactions with the onscreen environment artefacts. On the lift door opening we are able to use the keys W, A, S, D to navigate around the space, which in this section is an underground garage where Henry's car awaits our mouse click to get in and then return to the text prologue.



Figure 46: First gameworld screenshot 2, Firewatch

Again, we are unable to do anything beyond looking around the limited space of the underground garage; we cannot pick up the backpack again, but we are reminded visually that Henry is still a married man as we can see his wedding ring. This seemingly minor point aligns with Keogh's suggestion that designing an onscreen environment in this way as a method of foregrounding the narrative and thus telling the story is a genre convention for the Walking Simulator (Keogh 2015).

The second gameplay section begins at the forest trailhead and shows us the map of the entire gameworld, thus reminding us of the highly bounded nature of this onscreen world. The third section teaches us to use the spacebar to 'hop' or climb over obstacles that Henry may come

across within the forest gameworld, and also affords a brief downwards glance at Henry's shoes and legs, thus reminding us that we 'are' embodied as Henry within the forest and aiding our cognitive engagement 'into' or 'with' - the moment of 'push', in Deictic Shift Theory terms - the gameworld avatar (representing Henry) deictically and immersively. The fourth gameplay section happens at night where Henry has set up camp on his hike to the lookout station where he will spend the summer. This section does not feature any new controls, but rather reminds us that by focusing the white ring upon interactive objects we can act within the gameworld. The final gameplay section within the prologue allows us to only move forward and not deviate from the path or from the walking pace. This steady walking pace of *Firewatch*, like most Walking Simulators, reminds us that we are being controlled by the game designers and writers because this is a deliberately slow narrative experience rather than an open world role-playing video game. It may also activate deep attention and the necessary 'meditative play' (2014: 36) that Ensslin suggests *literary* games demand. The unfolding of the narrative is forced into the conceptual foreground by preventing common gamerly interaction like running or choosing one's own path; the player-reader is deliberately 'slowed', and made to experience the storyworld, quite

literally, at a walking pace. In the same way that we cannot choose to have Robinson Crusoe stay home and work for his father, we cannot choose to have Henry get back into his truck and drive back to Boulder.

The main story employs the controls introduced in the prologue gameplay sections and as necessary further key instructions are given, but these remain common to many video games, particularly those within the role-playing genre. Thus, *Firewatch*, at first, presents itself as a more gamery or ludic experience because there is the appearance of agency offered by greater interactive controls.



















| Key | Default function |
|---|---------------------------------------|
|  | Movement |
|  | Interact, use |
|  | Zoom |
|  | Use the radio |
|  | Climb |
|  | Scroll dialogue up |
|  | Scroll dialogue down |
|  | Toggle walk/run |
|  | Map |
|  | Compass/wave receiver |
|  | Flashlight |
|  | Camera control |
|  | Read information on the received item |
|  | Pick up item |
|  | View notes |
|  | Quick save |
|  | Quick load |
|  | Pause menu |

Figure 47: Firewatch control guide (gamepressure.com n.d)

We can see from this list of controls that *Firewatch* appears to afford considerable agency for the player/reader with commonly used items like

a flashlight, compass, radio, as well as the ability to pick up items and move in different ways being in evidence here. However, this apparent interactivity is frustrated by the lack of items to pick up or interact with in any meaningful way, and the ability to climb or run are closely controlled and only available at certain points. In short, although *Firewatch* has the appearance of an 'open world'²⁸ that can be journeyed around with freedom, the underlying gameworld keeps users within a tightly controlled area of the gameworld, yet this will of course again activate and reinforce existing genre schema in many users. On arrival at the lookout at the beginning of the main gameplay it is night-time and dark. We may have the apparent opportunity to wander away from the lookout, but it is with a very limited view because of the lack of daylight. In the following 'days' it is possible to wander at will, but in essence we are wandering around different daily forests with different plot threads that all share the same appearance. This allows the developers to offer a coherent and linear story embedded into the gameworld mechanics. Each morning we begin with a 'new' forest with new options and plot developments. This neatly avoids the inherent problem faced by hypertext stories: if the reader is allowed the freedom to access different threads or timelines at random then any

²⁸ Commonly in action adventure and role-playing videogames players are presented with a gameworld that they are free to explore, hence 'open world'.

story becomes confusing and potentially collapses, leaving the reader confused. In the prologue this technical problem is avoided by having a single stream storyline with minor departure options which then flow back into the main stream. Although there are sixty-four possible different combinations, ultimately the reader arrives at one of two outcomes: Julia is in Boulder or she is in Australia, in both settings she still has dementia, and in both settings, she still requires 24-hour care.

8.2 Storyworld

The story of *Firewatch* is structured in two different ways, as mentioned earlier in 5.2.1; a linear (despite the appearance of being branching) prologue and then an exploratory narrative presented in an overall linear structure of days in the forest. The main story-line, as mentioned, is relatively straightforward and entirely embedded into the gameworld as we are able to actively 'be' Henry with the ludic deictic shift (which we will turn to below). The 'subsidiary story-line' (Rimmon-Kenan 2003: 17) offers a rich storyworld that must be cognitively constructed from text

fragments found in letters, and then briefly referred to in the main story-line: the story of Ron and Dave as outlined previously in 6.3.2. Aside from this intriguing element within the storyworld of *Firewatch* it remains a more game-like Walking Simulator in terms of its linear narrative structure and use of direct exposition and backstory. *Dear Esther* starts in media res, but *Firewatch* begins with establishing the beginning of the story. Starting at the beginning is a common feature of video games; often we are given a backstory so we can understand character motivation, presumably, in an often unclear and confusing gameworld. This linearity is a fairly common feature of canonical literary fiction which often start at the beginning of the character's life, or early years, and then give us the 'main story-line' (Rimmon-Kenan 2003: 17). *Firewatch* follows a similar structure.

The story of *Firewatch* is told from a first-person point of view throughout, again a more game-like method which will likely prompt the user's videogame schema which we will turn to shortly when examining the forum responses that describe the users' cognitive experiences of *Firewatch*.

8.3 Attention

Turning first to mentions within the *Firewatch* forum of time spent within the gameworld, again we are faced with the complication that deep attention may not be easily isolated and will suggest immersion too. This is further hampered by the shared elements of videogames that *Firewatch* utilises: first person view, some interaction with onscreen artefacts, and the appearance of agency that arises out of onscreen interaction and movement. As we have seen in the gameworld section above, *Firewatch* has two different opportunities for deep attention: the text adventure style prologue, and the more game-like main story. It is through the use of a text prologue that the themes of 'love, loss, and loneliness' as described by Ditung (2016: n.p.), are introduced and established, and by the presentation of the prologue as a text that deep attention is like to be incited as the user must read, reflect, and then choose which options to pick. As mentioned above, this text section has the appearance of being a branching narrative but ultimately the options are little more than window-dressing and make no difference to the outcome within the main story. It is within the main body of the story that the simple controls and enforced slow movement that further encourage us to engage in deep

attention (as mentioned, indicative of a type of ‘literary’ reading), rather than the hyperattention encouraged by most video games, and perhaps a ‘meditative’ experience as suggested by Ensslin (2014: 90) within that deep attention.

However, the expected evidence of deep attention, as described in my Walking Simulator stylistics framework, of ‘long durations of interaction’, is overshadowed within the forum by discussions about value for money. The discussions are, in outline, that the longer it takes for the ‘average’ player to navigate through the gameworld of *Firewatch* and discover the main story-line the more value is offered, and the converse (particularly those users reporting below four hours of interaction) represents a waste of their time and money which suggests instead that these player/readers are instead experiencing a disruption of their schema expectations and the experience presented by *Firewatch* as they were prepared for a traditional videogame but instead received a more readerly literary type of experience.

With this Walking Simulator evidence drawn from other cognitive engagements may provide us with some evidence of deep attention, so we will turn now to the immersion types reported by users.

8.4 Immersion

Firewatch, as we have seen, opens with a text story that provides us with the background of our main character, Henry. This opening with a literary text likely activates transportation immersion but, as we will see from the forum comments, the change to a more traditional videogame environment offers immersion brought about mainly by emotional engagement, like *Dear Esther*. This is not to say that other forms of transportation immersion are lacking; sense of place brought about by visual verisimilitude and recognised place names also provide immersion. As Ryan suggests, a direct and mimetic sense of place is not ideally conveyed by language (2015: 87) and it is to the audiovisuals of the gameworld setting that we turn to for examples of verisimilitude as users of Walking Simulators. However, Ryan also suggests that small details like place names, ‘the immersive power of topographical names’ (2015: 90) can instigate spatial transportation immersion, and in this thread, we see names and visual depiction being questioned by user Zain Eternity:

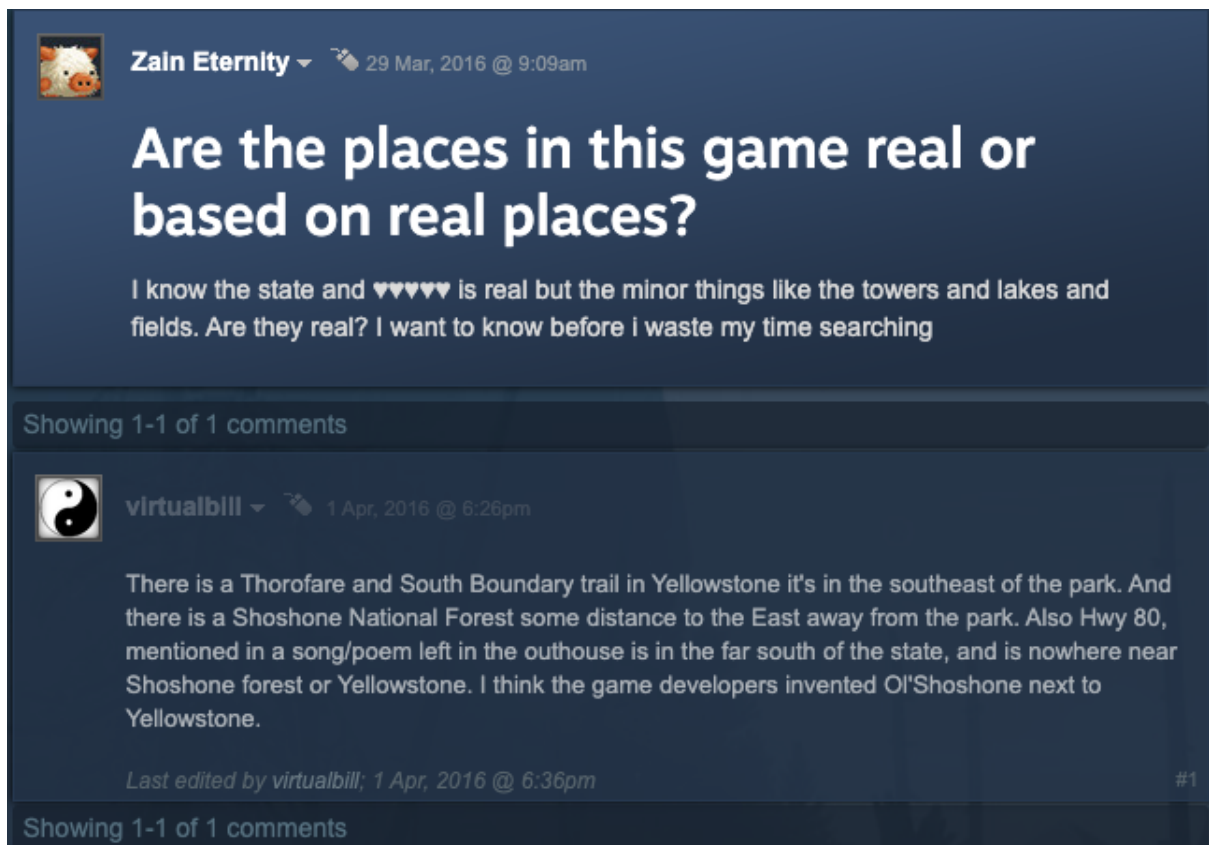


Figure 48: Steam comments (Zain Eternity, virtualbill 2016)

Certainly, here we are seeing the use of a well-established literary technique to enable transportation immersion among users, however its veracity is questionable when placed against the reality. This may frustrate user immersion if they are unwilling to suspend their disbelief, as this more recent thread started by user Firestorm suggests:

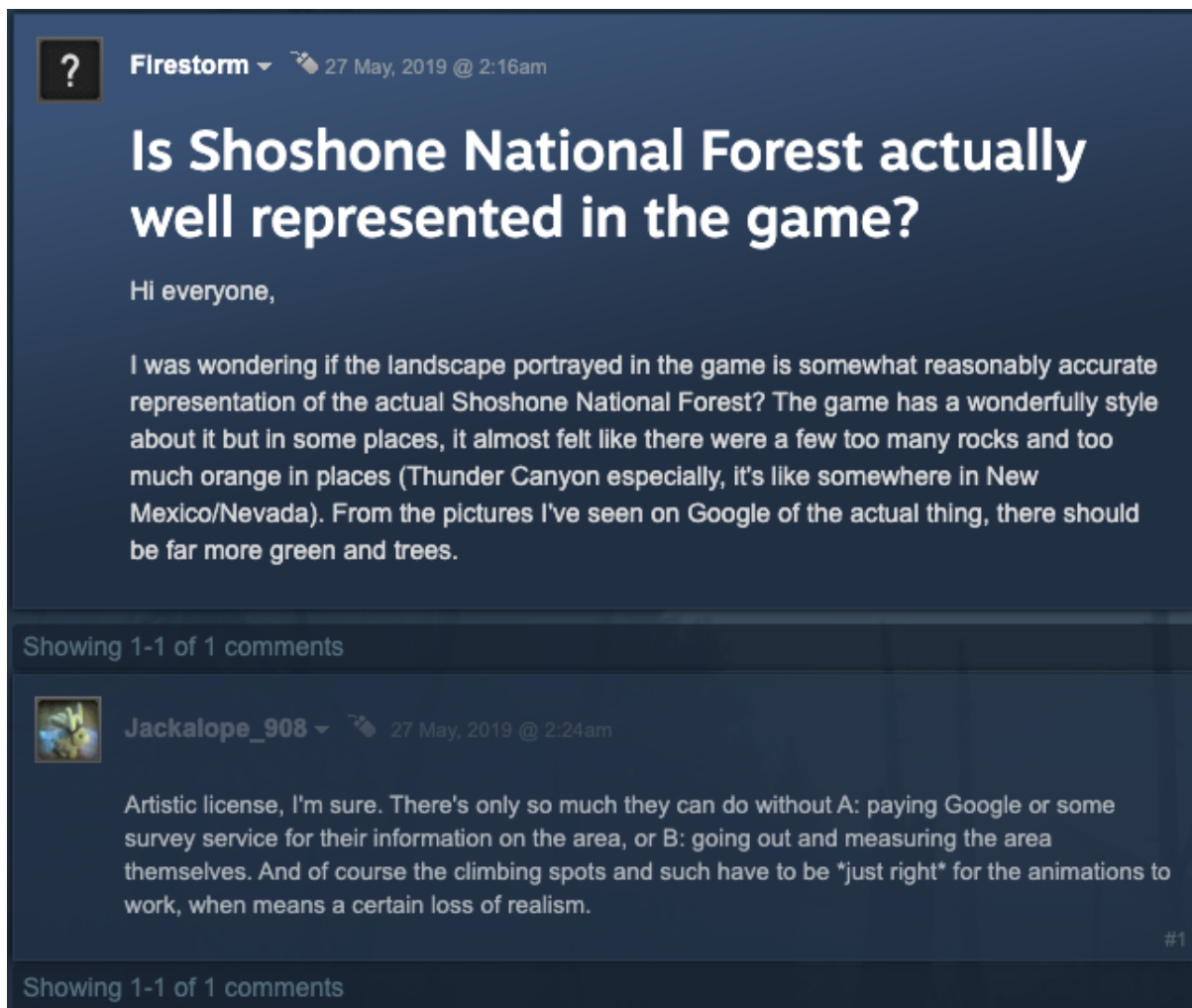


Figure 49: Steam comments (Firestorm, Jackalope_908 2019)

The comments here point to necessary technical affordances of the computer coding ('for the animations to work'), as well as 'style' or 'artistic license'. We could assume that if these users are motivated sufficiently to post questions about the geographical setting of *Firewatch* then they must have considered the audiovisual elements that contribute and thus have experienced some sort of spatial immersion. However, in this thread started by user ObsessedEddie we see that the lack of verisimilitude in *Firewatch* is a source of disappointment despite 'artistic

license’:

The screenshot shows a Steam comment thread. The main comment is by **ObsessedEddie**, dated 4 Apr, 2019 @ 10:57pm. The title is "Environment feels empty and created by developers who don't spend time outside." The text reads: "Lack of wildlife, proper vegetation, or believable protagonist are serious negatives that should bring this game down to at least a mostly positive." and "Believable protagonist, as in, vocally and visibly, incapable of his tasks as a fire watcher." It is edited by ObsessedEddie on 21 Apr, 2019 @ 1:55pm. Below this, a comment by **staryoshi06** (5 Apr, 2019 @ 10:10am) quotes the original post: "Originally posted by ObsessedEddie: Lack of proper vegetation" and asks "What?". A second comment by **ObsessedEddie** (5 Apr, 2019 @ 8:01pm) quotes staryoshi06's comment: "Originally posted by staryoshi06: Originally posted by ObsessedEddie: Lack of proper vegetation" and asks "What?". At the bottom, ObsessedEddie adds: "all the vegetation looks horribly fake for anyone who actually spends time outside. the forests in skyrim have more detail".

Figure 50: Steam comments (ObsessedEddie, staryoshi06 2019)

For this user, ObsessedEddie, onscreen verisimilitude is clearly important

as they refer to the more traditional videogame *Skyrim* which offers something closer to the actual world, rather than the stylised depiction of *Firewatch*. It is also interesting that ObsessedEddie also draws attention to the lack of efficacy shown by the character Henry in his job as fire watcher; this user is unwilling to 'set aside' (Walton 1978: 23) their disbelief in favour of this storyworld's depiction of this character who is not good at his job because this will further the narrative. We can conclude that for this user at least, *Firewatch* does not conform to their existing schemas of videogames and thus they reject any refreshment.

As *Firewatch* is set in the 1980s it is to be expected that some users will have personal experience of living through that time, and those users may well have experienced a rapid spatio-temporal immersion and relevant schema activation, thus being able to imagine themselves transported back to their own past experiences; unfortunately, Steam does not provide any demographic details of their users so we can only speculate. However, whereas in *Dear Esther* personal experiences contributed to some users' quick transportation immersion into the onscreen virtual world, in *Firewatch* it causes the opposite for some posters, who have drawn upon their personal schema to compare the story and gameworld offered onscreen to examine its authenticity.

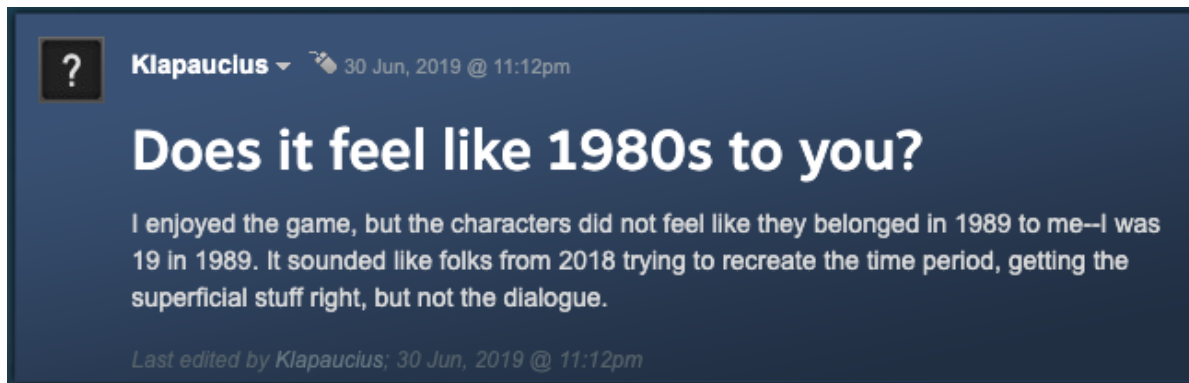


Figure 51: Steam comment (Klapaucius 2019)

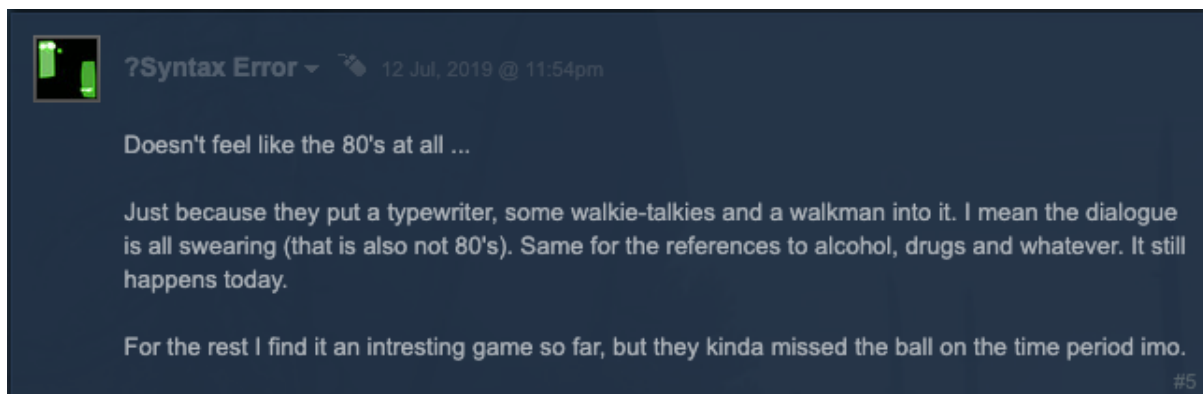


Figure 52: Steam comment (?Syntax Error 2019)



Figure 53: Steam comment (Jouchebag 2020)

These posts from the same conversation thread interrogate the dialogue of *Firewatch* for accuracy and the 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket* is referenced (with the proviso that the film depicts the 1960s and '70s) as evidence that dialogue with profane language is authentic for the 1980s, counter to user ?Syntax Error who claims that 'the dialogue is all swearing (that is also not 80's)'. It is evident that ?Syntax Error has experienced a 'pop' (Galbraith 1995) out of their immersed state by the perceived contemporary nature of the dialogue when compared to their personal memories of the time

period. It is likely that any storytelling set in a recent past within living memory will give rise to these differences in personal experiences amongst posters; this does not prove that these titles are any more or less literary or ludic, but rather that personal experience and schema may affect the ease of transportation immersion, as we also saw in the previous two examples.

If we turn now to how reader/players were transported by emotional immersion, as we saw with *Dear Esther*, many of the comments use the words 'feel', 'feels', or 'feelings', and whereas for *Dear Esther* the usage stands at only 18 in the 60 posts analysed, for *Firewatch* this is 43 uses in the 23 threads. There is a caveat here that this data is not directly comparable beyond both being in the Steam forums as the sample sizes are different; it does suggest, however, that the posters experiencing *Firewatch* had a more emotionally immersive experience that they wanted to share with others, but it must be borne in mind that this title has had more commercial attention and thus more participants over time.

The word 'love' (or 'loved') appears 25 times in the 23 threads, compared to *Dear Esther's* paltry 7 uses. Again, this suggests that *Firewatch* posters had a more emotionally rich experience compared to *Dear Esther*, but without further research to pose this question directly the number of

respondents to the forums skew these results in *Firewatch*'s favour. The use of emotional language like 'feel' or 'love' was also used in two different ways: to describe feelings towards the entire experience of *Firewatch* with many users responding that they 'loved the game'; others used it to describe their personal reactions to characters, the plot outcome, and the gameworld setting. Both uses suggest emotional involvement and engagement, and also reflects the greater publicity and attention that *Firewatch* has attracted, perhaps in part because of the use of a well-known actor playing the part of Henry.²⁹

If we examine those subjective reactions to characters and their behaviour, Ryan's first emotional transportation element (2015: 108), we find that in common with *Dear Esther*, *Firewatch* elicits melancholy and sadness from some of those who experience deep attention from their transportation immersion into the onscreen storyworld. In this thread a user poses the question: 'Am I the only one who miss [sic] Delilah and who cried at the end?' This only has two responses to it, but both reflect on their sadness that has arisen from their *Firewatch* experience:

²⁹ Henry is played by actor Rich Sommer better known for his part in the US TV show, *Mad Men*.

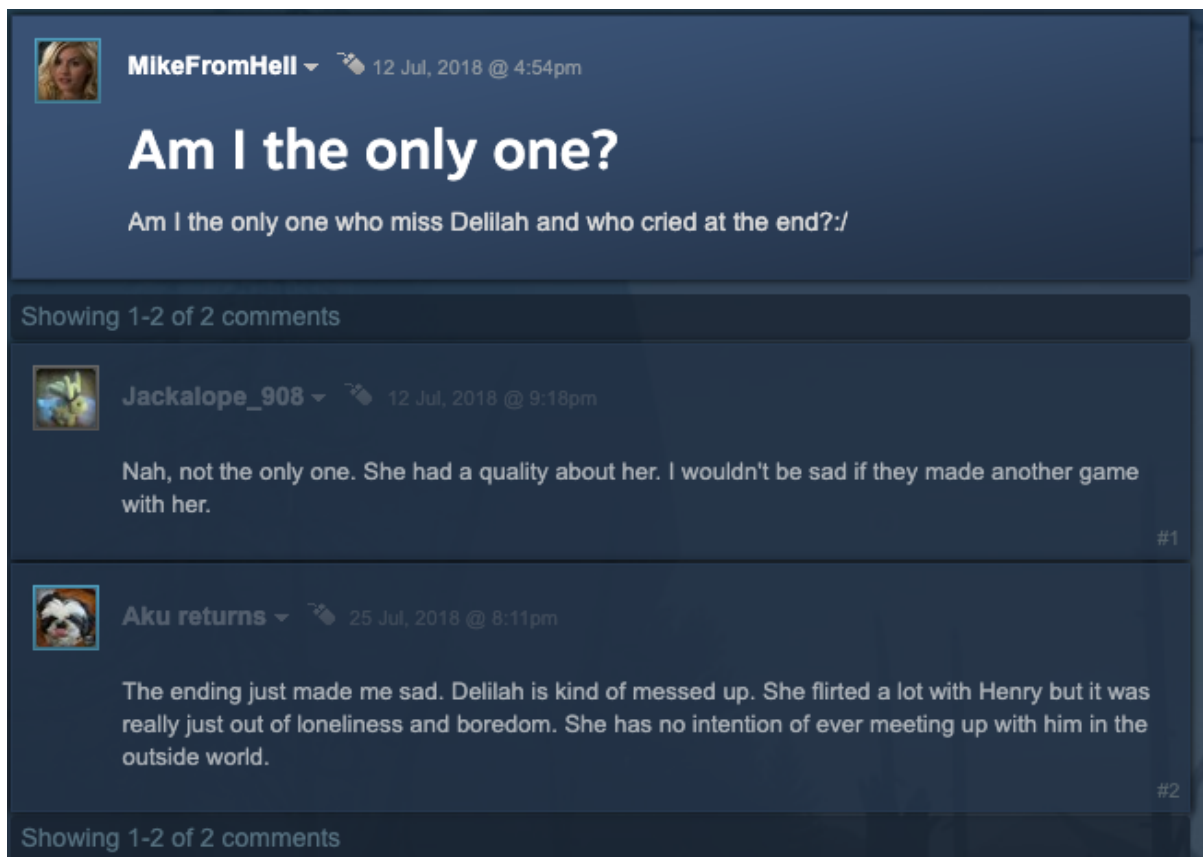


Figure 54: Steam comments (MikeFromHell, Jackalope_908, Aku returns 2018)

These brief exchanges show how emotionally affecting their experience of the *Firewatch* story was for these members of the online forum, and also some interpretation of Delilah's character and her motivations based upon their understanding of the exchanges between her and Henry added to their subjective emotional response. The final comments from Aku hypothesises about Delilah's character and show that for this user a text world has been created where Delilah has 'intentions' and as such this user has been 'mind-modelling' (Stockwell 2019: 155) this character; in other words, as Stockwell puts it, there is a 'presumption that the other person has a mind and consciousness that is basically like our own'. For a

reader/player to offer this insight into Delilah's character showing cognitive modelling it is evident that there has been a readerly literary type of experience.

Delilah also acts as the focus for this thread started by user Jura which poses the question of whether Delilah is 'annoying', and again draws upon real-life possible behaviours and clear mind-modelling of the character by this user:



Figure 55: Steam comments (Jura 2017)

The post also displays a *ludic* deictic shift as Jura begins using the first person when recounting their experience 'I told her', which suggests they felt embodied onscreen in the character of Henry. This appears to shift again in the second half of their comment to a second-person address ('you board the helicopter'), but this can be read as a self-address in place of 'one' and a shared first-person experience describing all those who have

also made an active embodied ludic type deictic shift into 'being' Henry. This is an interesting position as this user appears to be simultaneously inhabiting three conceptual spaces: the gameworld where they have made a ludic deictic shift ('I'), the storyworld where they are able to model Delilah's mind (she's described as being 'thirsty', meaning that she desires Henry), and the wider discourse world that recognises *Firewatch* as a constructed storytelling artefact where its purpose may be 'to simulate how a relationship can form'. We might term this type of simultaneous experience *blended worlds*, which arise from the Walking Simulator experience that draws upon ludic, literary, and discourse elements.

Ryan suggests that when considering empathy towards fictional characters, Currie's (1990: 187) rule for explaining the paradox of empathy for fictional characters can be employed: that 'we must believe the propositions that describe this situation' (Ryan 2015: 108); in other words, if the storyworld and plot are believable, by being accessible, then readers will experience empathy for the characters, although the feelings experienced in empathising are essentially 'make-believe' (Ryan 2015: 109) because we know these are not real people. Directly empathetic comments about characters within the Steam forum for *Firewatch* are sparse when compared to the large number putting forward

interpretations and dissatisfaction with the overall narrative resolution. However, this post from user Struggler and quoting Sofie reveals users who feel empathy for the two main characters, Henry and Delilah:

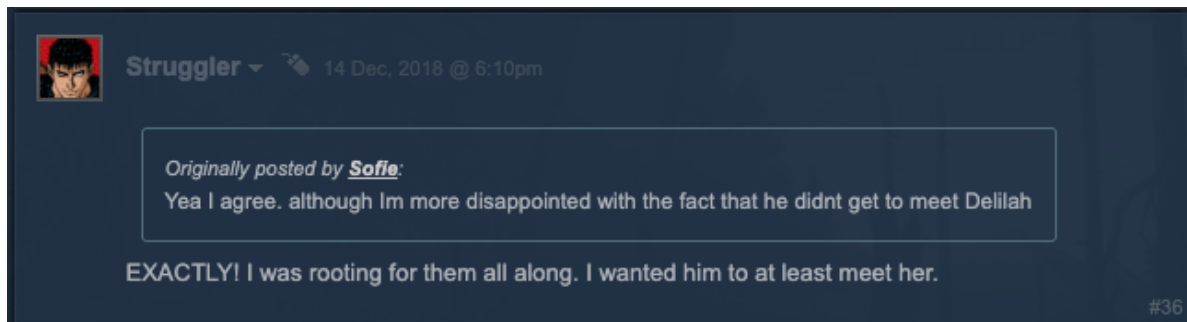


Figure 56: Steam comments (Struggler, Sofie 2018)

The quoted post that appears first hints at empathy for Henry as Sofie reports being 'disappointed' but this may be less about empathy for him and more a dissatisfaction with the narrative not providing a more traditional ending with clear resolution. The comment that follows, clearly shows that Struggler felt an emotional response not for themselves but for the characters as they were 'rooting for them'. However, if we apply Currie's rule then both posters believed in the storyworld and plot sufficiently to feel disappointment, but to precisely differentiate between a personal disappointment based upon authorial narrative decisions and thus an unsatisfying story or based upon an empathetic disappointment for the character's lack of resolution is impossible here without returning to the poster to clarify their remark. It is in this type of comment that

finer points of where emotion arises that a modified reader response study like this is something of a blunt instrument and suggests that future research studies into the types of emotional immersion felt by posters taking part in Walking Simulators or more traditional video games with a strong narrative will need to be more nuanced in their methodology.

Likewise, in this post from user Cyanide Muffin they report dissatisfaction with the resolution of the story:

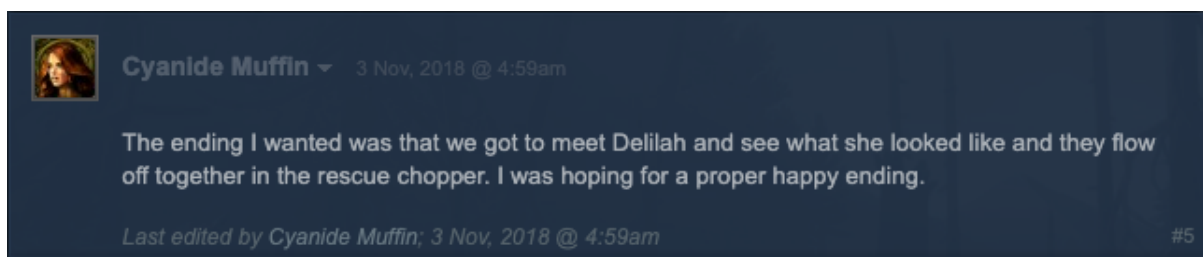


Figure 57: Steam comment (Cyanide Muffin 2018)

Again, we are left unsure as to whether the desire for 'a proper happy ending' is for the poster's desire for a traditional narrative resolution based upon personal preference (or, indeed, pre-acquired narrative schemas), or an empathetic reaction to Henry and Delilah's predicament. It is interesting that this comment uses both first person singular and plural forms of address, 'I wanted was that we', which shows this poster is not deictically embodied in the avatar of Henry, they have not become Henry, but in common with traditional storytelling media of text and film,

they are with Henry, 'we got to meet Delilah...and they flow (sic) off together'. This also displays an awareness that as user within the gameworld they are unable to leave the forest and instead they would be observers in a possible world that sees Henry and Delilah united and leaving.

The empathetic reactions reported by posters on the Steam forum for *Firewatch* suggest that the deictic positioning is somewhat fluid or, as Herman describes personal deixis, 'fuzzy' (Herman 2004: 332). Herman is referring to second person address in texts here, but *Walking Simulators* in particular, and videogames in a wider context, offer a 'fuzzy' personal deixis because of the multiple worlds presented where, in *Walking Sims*, the user overlays their actual world deictic position with an onscreen gameworld and then a further storyworld. It would appear that these blended worlds arise from the fulfilment of videogame schema allowed by a ludic deictic shift 'into' the gameworld where the user is embodied onscreen in the avatar (Henry in this example). Built upon this deictic shift is the transportation immersion activated first by the onscreen audiovisual elements of the gameworld but affording this more literary transportation arising from the storyworld and the concomitant demands of deep attention. The final element, that of their actual world deictic

position is maintained because of the necessary distance implied by a fictional text or game, in other words, no matter how immersed or deictically shifted an individual may be, they are still (on some cognitive level) aware of the real world around them and this is realised in their awareness of the limitations of the story and gameworld.

Again, without further questioning and research of participants it is impossible to discern whether their deictic positioning is situated as 'I' within a gameworld (as we commonly see with traditional First-Person Shooter videogames), or 'we' with the characters (as with other forms of literature texts), or if the positioning shifts between both at different points within the narrative action, or if the positioning shifts for individuals based upon their level of immersion. This thesis does not set out to answer any of these questions in particular, but rather suggests that these are interesting points that need addressing by future work.

Finally, if we turn to the emotional reactions felt by player-readers while experiencing Walking Simulators, as we saw with *Dear Esther*, these tend to be connected to feelings of fear, as Ryan explains that these feelings arise when users are deeply immersed and have a 'sense of presence'

(Ryan 2015: 110).

User Manders asks if *Firewatch* is 'scary' as they wish to avoid this type of experience. This elicits 17 responses which discuss and describe experiences of emotions felt for themselves while in the world of *Firewatch*, some of them shared here:

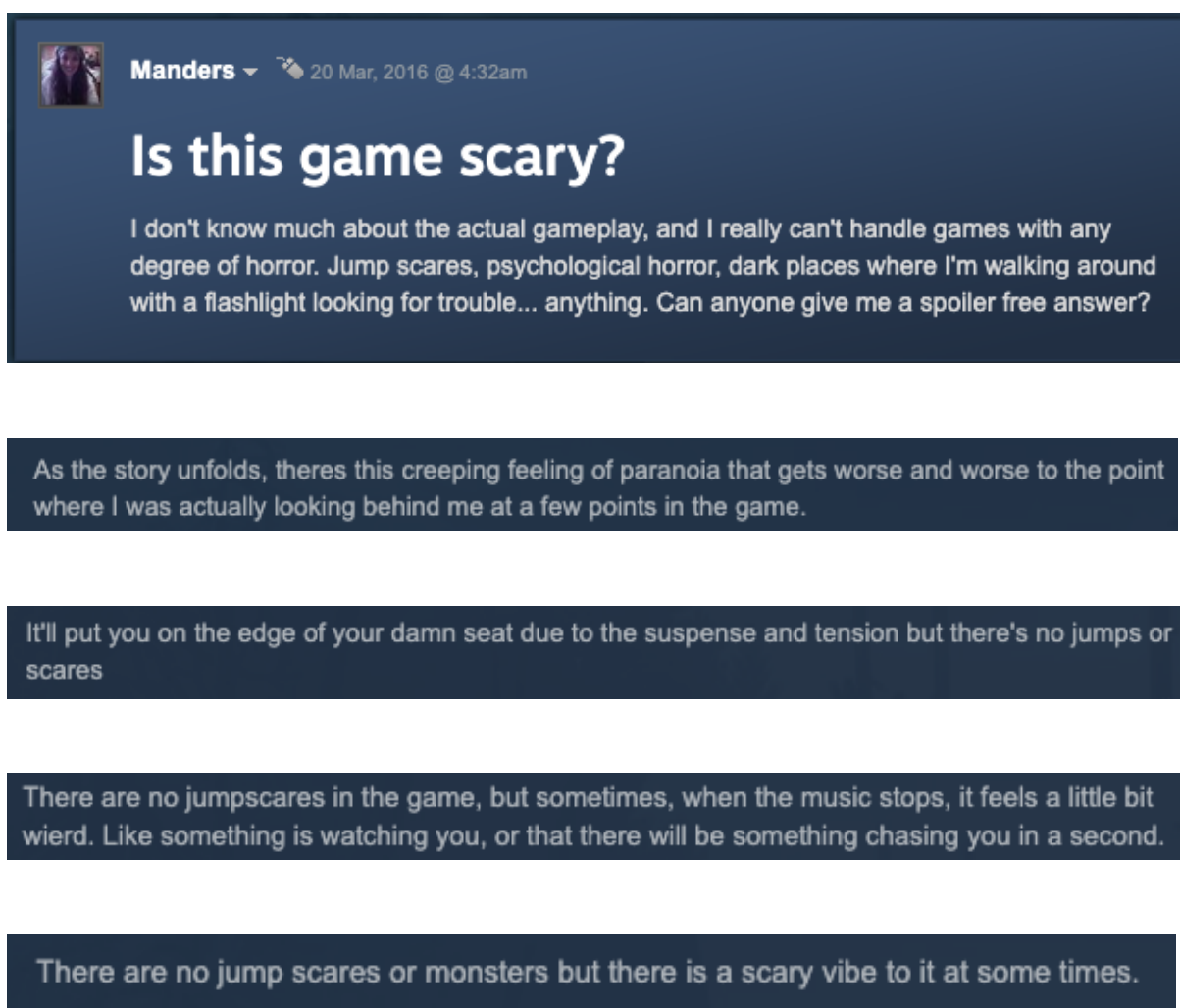
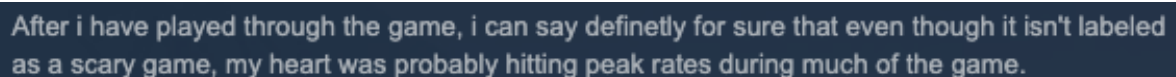


Figure 58: Steam comments (Manders 2016)

Each of these responders to the question report an atmosphere of tension and paranoia which conform to Ryan's 'what suspense' (Ryan 2015: 102), a

constituent part of temporal immersion. This is problematic because, as we saw earlier with empathetic reactions to *Firewatch*, a modified reader response study like this does not afford opportunities for asking users questions about whether their feelings of suspense were entirely tied to the onscreen experience or whether the feelings of paranoia extended to their real world. Again, this area would be ripe for further research.

As mentioned within the *Dear Esther* case study, although this thesis does not examine the effects of sound upon users as it is primarily concerned with text, language, and image, it cannot be entirely overlooked that soundtrack adds to the participants' immersive experience. The post that follows this one also underlines how the virtual experience has real-world effects for one poster:



After i have played through the game, i can say definetly for sure that even though it isn't labeled as a scary game, my heart was probably hitting peak rates during much of the game.

Figure 59: Steam comment (Midjomeister 2016)

With the widespread availability now of wearable devices that test heart rate, this particular experience had by this poster would perhaps be a starting point for further research into the emotional immersion felt while within the virtual worlds of Walking Simulators. This response suggests that the feelings experienced were for themselves, and thus an illustration

of Ryan's emotion immersion type felt for oneself.

8.5 Deictic Shift

We have already seen within the *Dear Esther* case study that the deictic shift experienced by users of Walking Simulators is nuanced, and likewise *Firewatch* presents more than a simple ludic deictic shift experienced by gamers in traditional videogames, or a passive deictic shift experienced when reading a literary text.

We saw in the previous section on immersion that *Firewatch* has given rise to some users referring to themselves 'in' the gameworld (user Jura describes themselves as Henry, 'I told her'). *Firewatch*, unlike *Dear Esther* depicts Henry, the main character as the onscreen embodied form of the player/reader; when, in the actual world, we move the mouse (or whatever controller being used) to pan the screen camera down, we are able to view a heavy-set male body. This visual element within the gameworld suggests and reinforces a ludic deictic shift: we are the character onscreen, our actions in the actual world are translated into

Henry's actions in the gameworld, and therefore his feelings and behaviour are, by extension, also ours. However, it is more common for the forum users to describe Henry as a separate character from themselves, but this post from Asher displays this multiple deixis, or *blended worlds* mentioned in the previous section:



Figure 60: Steam comment (Asher 2018)

Asher appears to have made an active embodied deictic shift here, as evidenced by the use of 'I', 'when I was in the SE territory...I noticed...I was at...I never saw' they have cognitively left their real world and moved themselves to the gameworld of *Firewatch*, yet they simultaneously are not Henry as they go on to say, 'what was the drawing of Henry', and 'he

was'. This is instead a ludic shift into the gameworld as they have some agency within it, evidenced by their moving around and use of 'I', but they are also simultaneously deictically separate from Henry as 'he' is still a character. We could describe this as suggested earlier, as an example of blended worlds because Asher is in the gameworld, observing the storyworld, and within the actual world too (where they are able to purchase *Firewatch* 'on sale for like \$4.99'). This would suggest that rather than a double deixis that Herman explains is a feature of text that 'functions as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles' (Herman 2004: 343), in other words, the use of 'you' in a text reminds the reader that they are both in the storyworld with the characters and simultaneously outside the storyworld as a reader. The Walking Simulator, as seen here with the shifting deixis offers opportunities for blended worlds to exist simultaneously which positions this genre between both videogame *and* literary text.

8.6 Schema

Firewatch presents a great deal of commentary from forum users discussing dissatisfaction with the title because it has not satisfied or refreshed their videogame schema. This dissatisfaction is evident in the many comments about time spent enjoying the title and correlation with purchase price and thus value for money. By May 2020 there were 423 mentions within the discussions of the word 'hour', which we could use as a simple marker of duration that might follow deep attention and temporal immersion. Some of the discussions relate to technical complaints about the Steam release of the title, but there remains a sizeable number of comments within threads that relate to temporal immersion duration and value for money:



Figure 61: Steam comments (Reign Havoocc, Razorbak86, nickleeb, BreezyLion 2016)

It is clear from this exchange between these four forum users that there are different opinions around whether spending time within a 'game' (as described in this exchange) is desirable or value for money. The mention of an 'average player' in the first comment from Reign Havoocc suggests that *Firewatch* is likely to appeal to those people who have a well-

established schema of videogames. This also reinforces a link between speed and efficiency or success; if a user can claim they ‘completed’ *Firewatch* in a particularly short period of time they must therefore be an effective player of videogames and thus somehow ‘win’. This runs counter to the existing culture of videogames and, as Ensslin has suggested, makes titles like *The Path*, another Walking Simulator, ‘anti ludic’ (2014: 142). *Firewatch*, as a Walking Simulator offers an opportunity for what can be described as ‘slow gaming’ (Corcoran (2010: 20), Marsh (2016: 45)) which demands deep attention and a refreshment of videogame schema to expand into a literary experience.

Kagan has discussed how *Firewatch* directly challenges societal expectations and thus, schema of masculinity and leaves players frustrated because they (as Henry) are effectively emasculated. Kagan says, ‘Here we have a hero living a modern version of cowboy life: a rugged loner in the Wyoming woods, an unacknowledged alcoholic trying to escape a tragic past, essentially a videogame John Wayne’ (2018: n.p). *Firewatch* offers traditional, or stereotypical markers of masculinity: cowboys, physical strength and solidity, independence, little care for their physical or mental health, and being well able to survive in harsh surroundings. Yet, as Kagan explains, the player is unable to effectively act

within this masculine paradigm because the gameworld frustrates this by being a Walking Simulator that lacks those elements of challenge and chance essential to games. The players' schema for videogames is not met by *Firewatch*, yet it is cued up by Henry, the character that we take an embodied deictic shift into and we cannot put out fires, chop up wood, hunt animals, or act in any ways that might match those schema expectations for a *videogame* set in a Wyoming forest. Instead, as Kagan suggests, a more 'feminine' role is undertaken by Henry as he talks with Delilah, and the player must become reader. This frustration of what Kagan calls a 'hypermasculine performance' (2018) is reflected in the user comments:

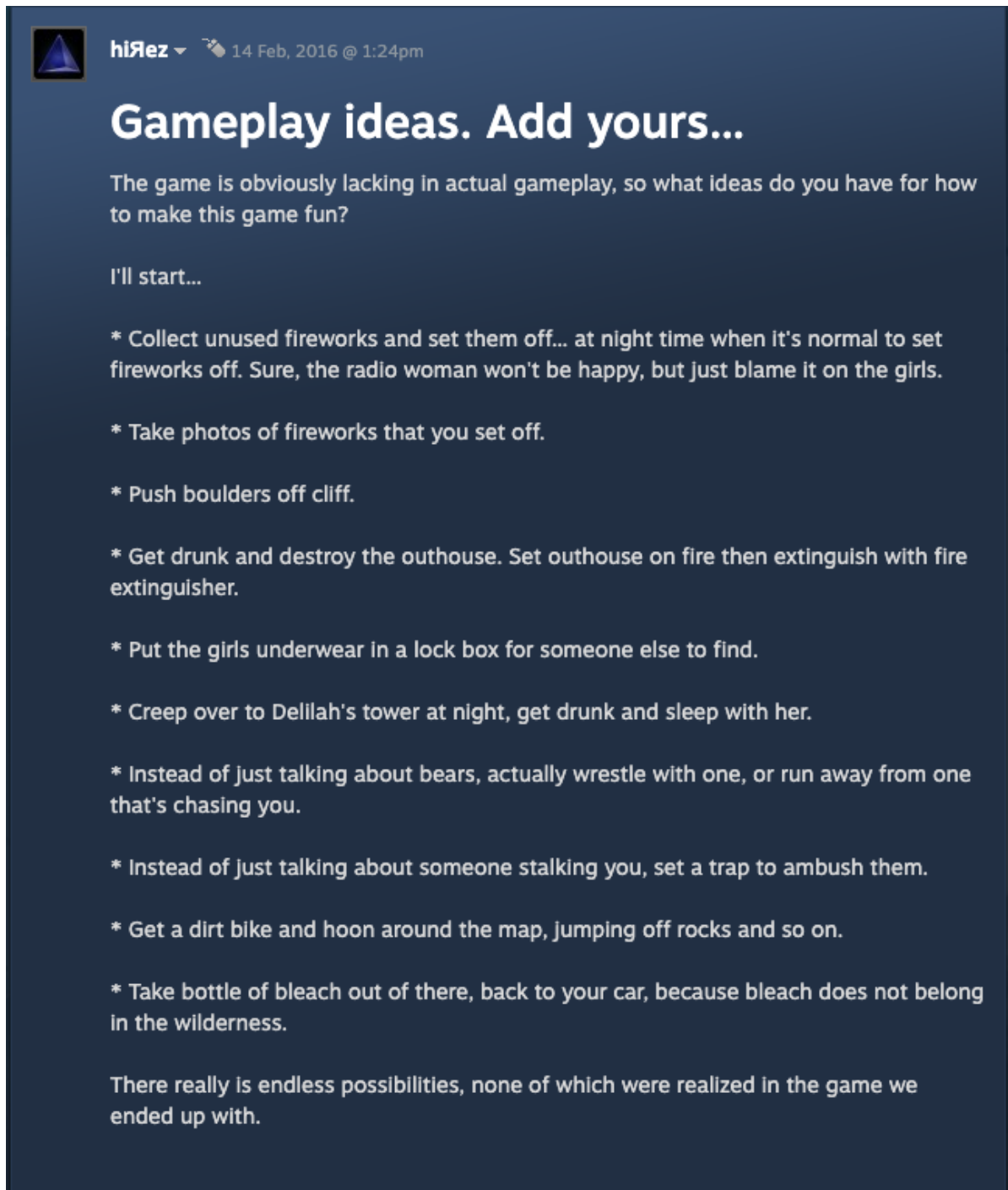


Figure 62: Steam comments (hiRez 2016)

This post from user hiRez reflects traditional videogame and hypermasculine schema: violence, destruction, drunkenness, physical shows of strength and daring, as well as general antisocial behaviour. The promise of many traditional videogames is that of hypermasculinity

(Kagan 2018) and opportunities to act out transgressive behaviour; we are famously able to steal cars and attack people in *Grand Theft Auto*. Thus, as Kagan suggests, *Firewatch* and *Walking Simulators* as a genre offer different propositions for masculinity, and thus directly challenge the player/reader's schema, and instead encourage a refreshment to how masculinity might be depicted in media as well as what videogames might offer.

However, despite some users rejecting the schema refreshment offered by *Walking Simulators* and *Firewatch* in particular, others have embraced it as shown by their engagement with interpreting the events and motivations of the storyworld which we will turn to next.

8.7 Revisiting: Non-Spontaneous and Non-cumulative Interpretations

Of the 222 threads analysed 64 of them contained overt interpretation and analysis using language such as: 'I think' (1.2.4, 5.3.5, 7.2.13, 8.2.2, 8.2.23, 8.2.27, 15.1.4), 'I felt' or 'I feel' (1.2.30, 7.2, 8.8.2, 8.2.6, 15.1.7), 'I

believe' (5.3.6, 8.2.7, 8.2.15), as well as phrases such as 'it was about', 'IMO', 'the whole game is about', 'it can also be argued that', all of which suggest a more literary engagement with the storyworld of *Firewatch*. Forum members report and discuss with one another their theories about the story of *Firewatch* and how it makes sense to them; in short, they are undertaking a literary analysis – a process of non-spontaneous interpretation - that we might see on the webpages of *Goodreads* or hear in a real-life book group, and it is likely that they have revisited *Firewatch* in the same way that the reader revisits paragraphs, chapters, or entire books to gain a 'unity' of understanding (Furlong 2008: 289).

As we saw with *Dear Esther*, those posts concerned with interpretation also tend to be long and expansive, and of those 64 overtly interpretative posts 20% of them (13 posts) are over 200 words long, the longest being 5.3.5 at 711 words.

If, like those posts about *Dear Esther* we also look for instances of literary language we see that there are terms we might expect to see when discussing books, but these do not entirely match those of *Dear Esther* as we can see in the table below:

| TERM | <i>Dear Esther</i> | <i>Firewatch</i> |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Magical Realism | 1 | 0 |
| Metaphor | 5 | 1 |
| Symbolism | 1 | 1 |
| Narrator | 0 | 0 |
| Personification | 1 | 0 |
| Analogy | 1 | 0 |
| Represent | 10 | 1 |
| Catharsis | 2 | 0 |
| Consciousness | 4 | 0 |
| Character | 20 | 21 |
| Interactive | 7 | 2 |
| Nonlinear | 1 | 0 |

| | | |
|----------------|----|---|
| Art | 7 | 1 |
| Interpretation | 10 | 2 |

Table 7: Literary language found in *Dear Esther* compared to *Firewatch* Steam forums

However, the word 'linear' is used three times, story is repeated 77 times and plot appears five times in the *Firewatch* forum. Additionally, terms like 'story driven', 'resolution', 'conclusion', 'story arc', 'antagonist', 'subtext and implication' all appear. As with the interpretative comments on *Dear Esther's* forum, this points to the users creating an 'interpretive community' normally seen with readers of literary texts (Fish 1976: 483).

Furlong's other form of rereading, that of non-cumulative or 'comfort' reading (2008: 294), while evident in *Dear Esther* as we saw in the previous chapter, is not apparent with *Firewatch*. On the Steam gaming platform it is possible to experience *Firewatch* in 'freeroam' mode once the main story-line has been completed and thus all areas of the forest are accessible. Some users on the forum have suggested collecting various items such as pinecones and books, all of which offer some interaction in the form of picking them up and moving them around the gameworld. This collection process may offer a certain element of 'completeness' in the same way that the Steam achievements may also offer, but this is not

the same as a reader returning to a favourite novel to recapture their original experience as Furlong describes (2008: 294), instead this is better interpreted as an element of gaming as it is a challenge to find all items. Why *Firewatch* does not appear to attract revisiting for comfort or the pleasure of being in the gameworld or storyworld may be related to its closer resemblance to a traditional videogame which once completed offers little for revisiting.

Thus, we have seen in this case study that *Firewatch* while presenting a gameworld that bears some resemblance to traditional videogames, the storyworld offers opportunities for schema refreshment. This title challenges contemporary notions of masculinity as they are commonly found in videogames, and this is two-fold because Henry's story is one of a man examining his life with a possible future as a carer, and the gameworld prevents any violent or action-filled responses to events.

Throughout the game-play of *Firewatch* the participant is impotent and restricted to a largely passive role where we may select spoken responses from Henry to Delilah, but these make no difference to the final outcome.

9.0 The Novelist

The previous two case studies do not follow chronologically on from one another; *Dear Esther* was released commercially in 2012, *Firewatch* in 2016, and *The Novelist* in 2013. However, they have been ordered within this thesis on something of a spectrum from more ‘literary-like’ to more ‘game-like’, with *Dear Esther* having, at first glance, the most in common with literary texts, and *The Novelist* the least. Yet, each of these titles present very little game elements and instead offer many aspects shared with our expectations of literary texts. *The Novelist* is not a particularly well-known Walking Simulator, despite having won awards, and rave reviews. In common with *Dear Esther*, very little in the way of scholarship has been devoted to *The Novelist*, with it currently featuring as a minor footnote in conference papers (Kania (2014), Ferguson et al. (2019), Carstensdottir et al. (2019)).

Set in a house on the beach where the Kaplan family have come for the summer, *The Novelist* is a story that unfolds in chapters. Dan, his wife Linda, and son Tommy, spend their summer pursuing their own interests to a lesser or greater extent depending upon the choices made by the

reader/player, who remains an unseen observer (ghost-like) and is in effect the 'novelist' of the title, creating a new version of events each time the title is played. The player-reader is also, to a large extent, the writer.

Allowing Dan to pursue his writing and become a successful novelist comes at the expense of his marriage or relationship with his son which results in divorce, or Tommy's early death from drug addiction.

Compromising throughout the game and balancing the needs of a relationship with Linda, parenthood with Tommy, and Dan's career as a novelist, can produce a 'winning' outcome where each character is 'happy'.

103 threads were consulted with 21 meeting the criteria, amounting to 16,776 words, only a slightly smaller word count than *Firewatch*. The comments on *The Novelist* (those that met the criteria, the 21 threads) were largely long reflective posts which is indicative of the title itself which encourages the audience to consider how they might behave in similar situations.

As we shall see, *The Novelist* does include elements previously identified as 'literary' in scope, but it is arguably the most ludic of all the case studies as it is closest to a traditional videogame. This is because it entails winning and losing outcomes in the form of failed relationships or lifelong success of their child, and/or a happy marriage. In this way the title is

more a simulation that allows the audience to experiment with different behaviours and in turn see the effects these have upon the relationships, and this experience is reflected in the comments found on Steam, as detailed in this case study.

9.1 Gameworld

Like *Dear Esther* and *Firewatch*, the gameworld of *The Novelist* is easily navigated; the familiar closed system of the interior of a house is presented, we are restricted to this space, and can use keys W, A, S, D, and the space bar to 'jump' between light fixtures and thus move around – an unseen 'ghost'. It is possible to zoom in on letters, diaries, pictures, and other items that show text or drawings, and by reading these and inferring their effects upon each of the characters daily (chapter ending) choices can be made which in turn alter the final outcome for the family. In common with *Dear Esther*, we are put into an *in media res* gameworld from the start. There is the option of a tutorial to familiarise oneself with the gameworld controls, but it is likely that most participants familiar

with traditional videogames would skip this and launch into the main game.

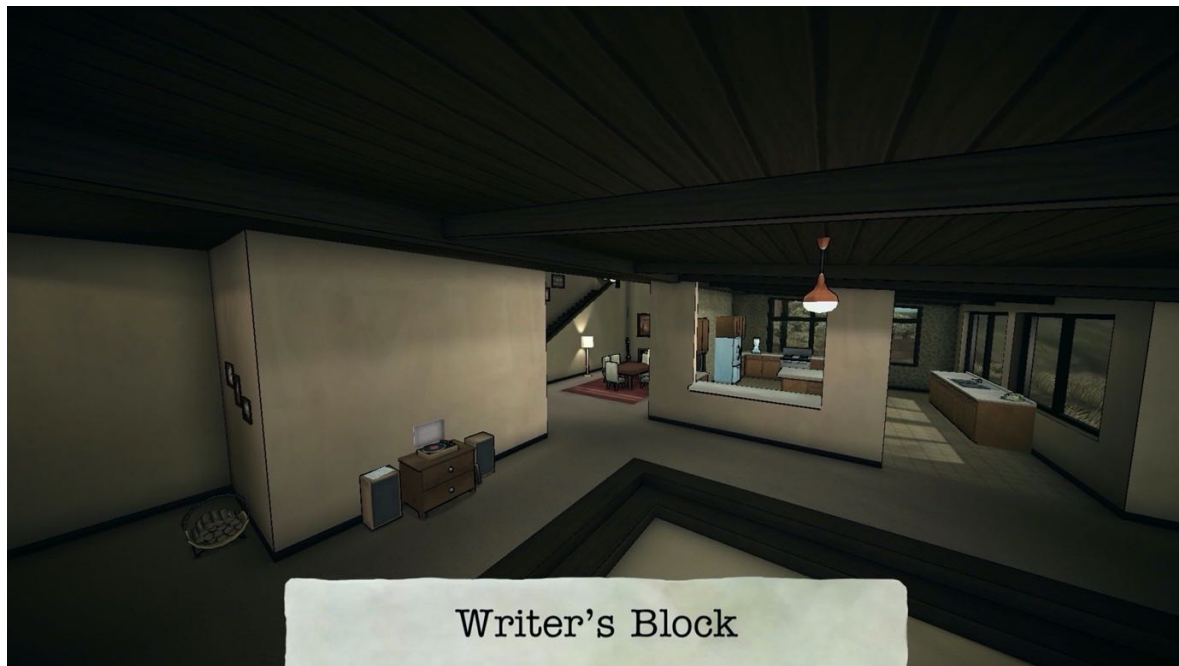


Figure 63: Opening screen of *The Novelist* gameworld (1)

As can be seen from the screenshot, we are presented with the interior of a spacious home depicted in a stylised cartoon fashion. Participants are given an omniscient view rather than an entirely embodied or implied embodied point of view as with *Firewatch* and *Dear Esther* respectively.

This aligns with the narrative and conceit of the title as it is us, the player-reader, who acts out the work of The Novelist, although it, at first, appears that the main character, Dan Kaplan, is the eponymous hero.

As can be seen from the screenshot: at the outset we are presented with a typed chapter heading, 'Writer's Block', which appears onscreen letter by letter accompanied by a manual typewriter sound effect of keys being hit.

This expands to another line:



Figure 64: Opening screen of *The Novelist* gameworld (2)

This reads 'After a week at the house' and then fades away, thus suggesting that we have shifted from the typed page to the gameworld which is a presentation of the storyworld, and thus our shared (with the original author, Kent Hudson) imagined space. This is an interesting and unusual immersive method to use within a videogame, but it is an established form within filmmaking, often used with films aimed at children such as the 2001 film *Shrek* which uses an illuminated manuscript to set the scene of a fairytale. By employing an established filmic convention, we are able to quickly make the cognitive move, or deictic 'push', into the onscreen world and become immersed in a transportation

sense, because our schema for videogames is easily refreshed and expanded to account for this filmic element. The use of cartoon-like graphics and the links between videogame moving images and that of film make this expansion and refreshment of our schema easy to accomplish.

9.2 Storyworld

As established earlier, *The Novelist* is presented from an omniscient point of view and the narrative unfolds in a tightly controlled manner that reflects its mediality of videogame. Murray points out that digital environments, like videogames and digital literature, are ‘intrinsically procedural’ (1997: 71) meaning that each event is created by rules (if x, then y, for example). While *Dear Esther* and *Firewatch* allow us to forget this procedural nature of the computer, *The Novelist* foregrounds this element within the narrative as we must follow the same procedure each day or chapter of the story: find ‘clues’ around the house (letters, notes, drawings, journals, and so on), ‘listen’ to characters’ thoughts and memories; then based upon the information choose which character gets

their wants or needs met by the others. Like the other case studies *The Novelist* also offers elements of the storyworld that can only be accessed via textual evidence: letters not related to the family are scattered throughout the chapters of the story, instead these provide a rich background of the house itself. The letters are entirely superfluous to the main narrative and could be ignored or overlooked without any loss to Dan and Linda's story, yet they offer further intrigue: who were these people; why are their letters appearing around the house; what are their connections to Dan and Linda? These superfluous intrigues remain unresolved but offer a richer overall experience.

The choice the player makes at the end of each day or chapter informs the following day, and ultimately the final outcome of the story where we discover if the family stays together, breaks up, or whether any or all of the characters lead successful lives. This makes for an interesting narrative method within *The Novelist* because the necessary interaction within the gameworld where we must actively search for information and the characters provides us with the appearance of agency as we are able to choose the order of discovery each day for clues and characters and thus a feeling of control. Being able to select which character's desires are met provides an opportunity for authorial omniscience which is further

reinforced by the ability to 'listen in' to character's thoughts and memories. Thus *The Novelist* offers opportunities to be player with apparent agency within the gameworld, and simultaneously we are able to be reader or writer with knowledge gained from the characters themselves and affect the storyworld.

9.3 Attention

The Novelist is set in a house and we are tasked with discovering clues that will allow us to make decisions which affect the story; this much we have established. This use of the gameworld to foreground the malleability of the narrative arc, here a mixture of exploratory and branching narrative, allows the reader-player to first assume that a game-like experience with its attendant hyperattention will follow. However, as with all Walking Simulators, it becomes apparent very quickly that deep attention is demanded as the reader/player must piece together the clues, listen to the characters' memories and thoughts, and in turn, make momentous decisions about their lives. *The Novelist*, despite its heavy use

of game mechanics or ‘procedure’, still foregrounds narrative and, like *Firewatch* and *Dear Esther* is illustrative of slow gaming (Corcoran (2010: 20), Marsh (2016: 45)). Deep attention is evident, as we will see, from the user comments about their engagement with this title, and we will turn to immersion first.

9.4 Immersion

As we have seen in the previous case studies, Walking Simulators offer a multimodal experience that aids transportation immersion of a more readerly, ‘literary’ type because of the lack of flow immersion generated by repetitive physical movement. Instead, the gameworld audiovisual elements work in concert with the narrative presented. Unlike *Dear Esther* or *Firewatch*, which both provide opportunities for participants to recall places (Hebridean islands and the coast of Ireland in the case of *Dear Esther*) and thus incite spatial immersion, or times (the 1980s for *Firewatch*) and spatio-temporal immersion, *The Novelist* provokes reflection upon users' relationships and provides considerable emotional

transportation immersion which is discussed in detail in this section.

Although emotional immersion is the main driver for engagement and involvement in *The Novelist*, other forms of immersion are provoked too; this post from user Toast illustrates how their immersion is not a simple single type, but a concert of different immersive elements:



Figure 65: Steam comment (Toast 2014)

For this user, emotional immersion was triggered early ('I was emotionally invested from the start'), but it also shows deep attention with time spent ('I took about three and a half hours') and temporal immersion

considering outcomes ('time considering the decisions and what consequences each could have'). Interestingly spatio-temporal transportation immersion and character identification came later for this user, 'I came to find that I felt like I was playing the character of Dan...there was a closer connection to him'. This suggests that the differing varieties of what we have defined as transportation immersion (Ryan 2015: 85-114) do not all act simultaneously or to the same degree, but rather they ebb and flow ('I felt more disassociated with the ghost') as one moves through the story, providing attention is maintained. Again, this kind of cognitive engagement, as has been argued throughout, is symptomatic of a literary reading experience.

Further: as we saw with *Dear Esther* and *Firewatch* many of the comments use the words 'feel', 'feels', or 'feelings'; for *Dear Esther* the usage stands at only 18 in the 60 posts analysed, *Firewatch* 43 uses in the 23 threads, and *The Novelist* has the most at 64 in only 21 threads. Why *The Novelist* has more occurrences of posters discussing their feelings may be that posters are forced to make choices based in their conceptions of emotion, ethics, morality and so on, rather than in *Dear Esther*, which does not offer the choices seen in a branching narrative. *Firewatch* has more reference to feelings, but still considerably less than *The Novelist* and this may be

because, as mentioned before, *Firewatch* is a fairly well-known title and thus attracts many posters who expect a traditional game experience, based of course upon their videogame genre schemas. Some more traditional videogames may offer emotional immersion but generally this is neither the expectation nor the experience provided. *The Novelist*, perhaps uniquely at the moment, was designed to make posters empathetic towards the characters, as the developer, Kent Hudson says on the Steam forum:

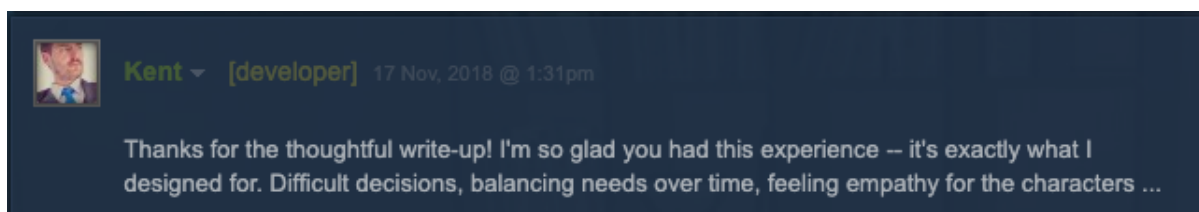


Figure 66: Steam comment (Kent 2018)

This is a useful comment to have added to the general discussion about *The Novelist* but it also presents something of an intrusion to the community because rather than forming their own theories based upon their experience and then debating the likelihood of these ideas, they have the developer, who is also the sole writer, providing a definitive canonical reading. It may well be that many posters enjoy Kent Hudson's forays into the Steam forum and his confirmation and validation of their views, and indeed it may even help to increase feelings of community, but it may also be stifling some discussions that are not appearing because of

his intrusion.

Overall, many commenters remark how the relationships shown in *The Novelist* had affected them negatively, although one poster comments that they 'became fond of this little family' (Puzzlefuzz 2015). The main emotion that posters record in their comments are negative ones with words like 'sad' (2.3.10), 'hopelessness' (4.3), 'sombreness' (4.3.1), 'melancholy' (4.3.2), and how the experience had 'hit home' (4.4). This does appear to be a main feature of Walking Simulators as most present stories that evoke sadness because, at the moment, they tend to deal overwhelmingly with loss; I will return to the idea of thematic content in the concluding chapter.

As mentioned in the previous case studies, sound also adds to the overall atmosphere for participants and goes a considerable way to aid the creation of tension, sadness, or, as in the case of this post on *The Novelist* forum, hopelessness:

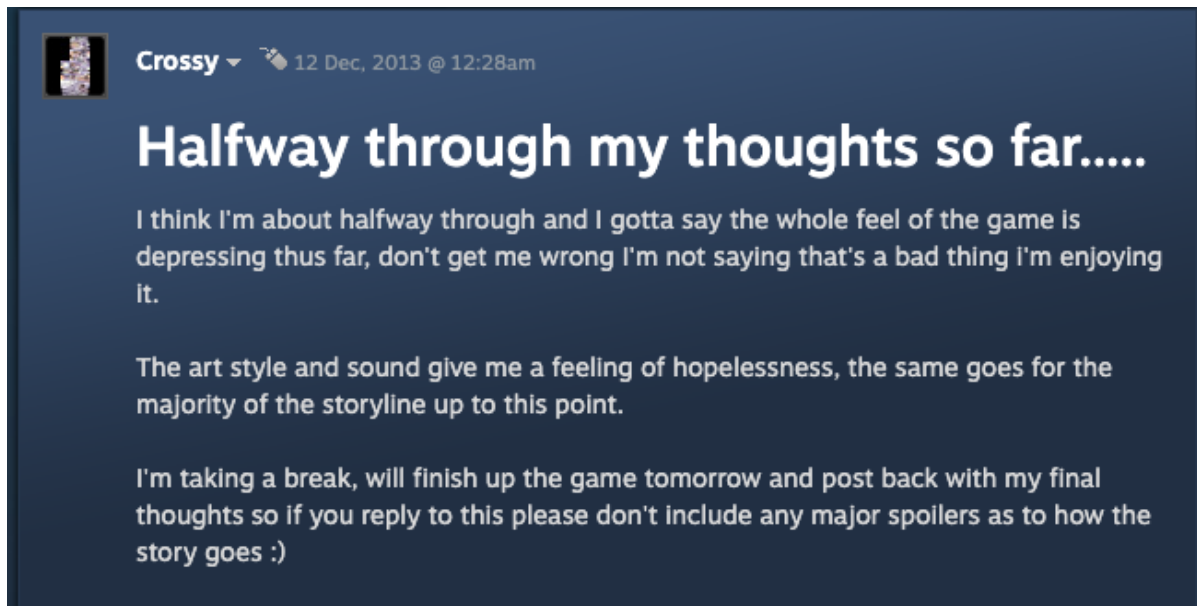


Figure 67: Steam comment (Crossy 2013)

This user, Crossy, by mentioning that ‘the game is depressing...I’m enjoying it’ illustrates what Currie calls ‘quasi-emotions’ (1990: 199) which is not an actual world emotion but instead one we feel when immersed into a storyworld where we believe the propositions of the narrative. Crossy is engaged and deeply immersed in *The Novelist* and thus believes the storyworld events and characters, and thus is moved to feel ‘hopelessness’ induced by the multimodal presentation of the narrative effected by audio and visual elements. To reiterate, this thesis does not cover the use of sound and music within Walking Simulators as it focuses upon linguistic communication, however, the point about auditory stimulus repeats in sufficient numbers as to make it an area of importance for these titles, and it remains a gap needing to be filled with future

research.

Many subjective emotional responses to the characters are reported on the Steam forum for *The Novelist* suggesting, as Ryan says that feelings of like and dislike as well as judgements on their behaviour, are ‘conducive to immersion’ (2015: 108). The following thread, started by user Jeffy, the Burglar’s cat, illustrates the deep emotional immersion many users experience when in the world of *The Novelist*:



Jeffy, the Burglar's cat ▾ 21 Dec, 2013 @ 7:29pm

I know this makes me a bad person but Linda annoyed me

I found it hard to take her needs as seriously as Dan and Tommy's. I've only played the game once so far, though I will definitely play it again, so maybe it's the options I chose but Linda just seemed like a buzz kill to me.

Then I wondered if I was simply being sexist. I hope not. And I've never thought about that when gaming before. I love how The Novelist throws up some deep questions.

So, did anyone else struggle to warm to Linda?

Showing 1-12 of 12 comments



MagyarMike ▾ 23 Dec, 2013 @ 8:27am

Have to be honest with this one I felt like throughout the game she was getting more and more selfish. (Although at one point she took a hike by herself because I chose the other two characters and she twisted her ankle so GG, Linda) IT just felt like she constantly wanted Dan to not work on his book at all or spend less time with the kid and completely throwing away the whole concept of "the kid comes first." So nope you weren't the only one!

#1



MandyMo ▾ 28 Dec, 2013 @ 4:04am

Fascinating. I imagine that we interpret the characters through our own perspective. I am a childless woman and I write for a living as a part of my job, so I find myself empathetic toward Linda and Dan, and I am probably neglecting Tommy!!!

#2



Jeffy, the Burglar's cat ▾ 30 Dec, 2013 @ 5:02am

I think that's exactly it. I mainly focussed on Dan and Tommy because I was putting Tommy first and Dan seemed to mean more to him so I was also trying to make Dan happy. If I look at my real life I can see exactly where that motivation comes from. Plus, Linda annoyed me.

#3



Entius ▾ 1 Jan, 2014 @ 9:20pm

Linda seemed somewhat selfish throughout the game, though I felt the selfishness was more from she being tired from him having writers block and demaning so much to break it.

#4



qwillhawkeye ▾ 17 Jan, 2014 @ 1:18pm

I'm a woman, wife, and writer and I agree that Linda tended to be selfish. The only way she was happy was if I put her above everything- if you don't spend your inheritance on her but get her into the coop by working for them, she feels disappointed (even if what you spent the money on was Tommy). If we go to Blaster Bay instead of the camping trip, she's upset. And the camping trip made Tommy and Dan upset, even with a compromise.

I got the feeling that Linda doesn't understand the struggle of writing since painting seems to come so easily to her. I would have liked one of the challenges being "painter's block" so Dan could help her with it and she could get some empathy for his situation. Of course, Dan struggles so much with writing that I was also wondering if maybe he should give it up or focus on being a short story writer instead of a novelist, at least for a time.

#5



andouta ▾ 2 Mar, 2014 @ 8:01pm

I'm a woman and I hated Linda too. I was expecting her to be at least a little bit happy when Tommy is happy, like a normal mother would be, but no. Always whining about something, couldn't take her seriously at all.

#6



The Common Cold ▾ 8 Mar, 2014 @ 12:59am

The biggest event I went full "yes, this is important" was the funeral for Linda, but while she seemed selfish she was trying to reconnect with her husband (at an awkward time) as she realized their relationship and marriage was falling apart: this time at the cabin the last time they would have to reconnect. It's not just about the novel, etc. It's about family.

#7



gnfdrs_rule ▾ 4 May, 2014 @ 7:53pm

She came across more like a plot device than an actual character many times to me, like she just got upset about taking the kid on a trip instead of using her camping suggestion purely because the game needed her to be upset for some reason.

#8

 **MetalGearOpz87** ▾ 6 May, 2014 @ 7:11am

I was trying to make the whole family happy. And for the most part, I succeeded. **At the expense of Dan having to quit writing , and making Linda and Tommy happy. The marriage was saved at least.** I agree with everyone though. Linda pisses me off.

Last edited by MetalGearOpz87; 6 May, 2014 @ 7:11am #9

 **Kelra** ▾ 6 May, 2014 @ 4:23pm

I'm not sure whether this really "makes you a bad person", Tarago. Seems like your opinion is shared by many, including me. However, I think that it is intentional that Linda's needs and moods sometimes seem a little overstretched. During my play of the game, there were several points where it could not be obvious for Dan what the motives behind Tommy's and Linda's wishes were... but isn't that kind of the point? Going out of your way because you love people? A motive, by the way, that is extremely prevalent in entertainment media these days. #10

 **Liberteer** ▾ 13 May, 2014 @ 11:44pm

I've wanted Dan Kaplan to go Jack Torrance all of a sudden and waste both of them. That's how my they've annoyed me. #11

 **Twelvefield** ▾ 19 May, 2014 @ 5:23am

Well, I disagree completely.

Linda is self-centered, but she's certainly not selfish. True selfishness is the heart of evil. If Linda was that evil, she would never be able to love Dan or Tommy.

Out of all the characters, I related the strongest to Linda. I am also a visual artist and I can write.

I thought Dan's book was crap right from the get-go. The reason behind my assessment is that Dan is just not a fully grown adult. He's allowed himself to fall into an untenable position by following the leads and examples of people who don't value Dan's worthiness as a person (his business minded publisher, and the "friend" from whom he poached the idea for his original book), and of course Linda is going to react to that. Naturally Dan's writing will suffer, too. Raymond Chandler didn't start writing until he was 45. Unfortunately, he was as much an alcoholic wreck as Dan's hero Hemingway. Chandler and Hemingway didn't have a Linda to get him past alcoholism.

Figures 68-70: Steam comments (Jeffy, the Burglar's Cat et al 2013-2014)

To summarise this thread:

4.5 Linda annoyed me...a buzz kill

4.5.1 she was getting more and more selfish.

4.5.3 Linda annoyed me.

4.5.4 Linda seemed somewhat selfish

4.5.5 I'm a woman, wife, and writer and I agree that Linda tended to be selfish.

4.5.6 I'm a woman and I hated Linda too.

4.5.8 She came across more like a plot device

4.5.9 Linda pisses me off.

4.5.10 Linda's needs and moods sometimes seem a little overstretched.

4.5.11 I've wanted Dan Kaplan to go Jack Torrance all of a sudden and waste both of them.

This last comment about Jack Torrance is a reference to the Stephen King novel, *The Shining* (1977), which is about a novelist spending winter in a deserted hotel with his wife and child while completing a novel, and during their stay he loses his sanity and attacks his family. This intertextual reference, or as Mason describes it, 'narrative interrelation' (2019: 22) is repeated later within the forums and is part of the

considerable interpretation and discussion that takes place about *The Novelist*, and which we will come to later when we turn to revisiting and rereading. What is important here is the strength of subjective reaction to Linda which points to posters being deeply immersed within the storyworld and strongly reflective of their own real-life opinions about women and their position in society and the family. This also suggests, as Currie describes, ‘we must believe the propositions that describe that situation’ (1990: 187), in other words, these users passing judgment on the characters of Linda and Dan sufficiently ‘believe’ in the storyworld presented by the narrative and gameworld that they draw upon their personal beliefs and schemas about behaviour in the proposed context of *The Novelist*. These users are so deeply immersed that their comments are those that they would give in response to real life (actual world) situations. This is, as mentioned, an established element of literary texts in the broadest sense (as storytelling artefacts); it is common for viewers of soap operas, for example, to discuss dramatic events recently broadcast even to the point of discussion in national newspapers, despite the awareness that these are fictions. Personal conversations with my elderly mother often reflect this as she prefaces her comments with, “I know it’s not real, but...”. Likewise, the users commenting upon Linda and Dan’s

behaviours are not unaware of the fictionality; they maintain their actual world deictic position even while immersed within the storyworld and gameworld of *The Novelist*, but it presents a verisimilitude of actual world events and thus activates real emotions, responses and belief structures.

9.5 Deictic Shift

We have already seen in the previous two case studies that Walking Simulators instigate a nuanced deictic shift that I have suggested is brought about by a *blending* of the worlds: actual, game, and story. We remain in the actual world while pressing buttons on a controller that result in onscreen actions in the gameworld, and thus we may be deictically ‘pushed’ there, and the audio-visual elements of the narrative, presented in the gameworld, provides us with the storyworld that we may also shift into. These three work in concert, as we have seen, and they result in unfixed cognitive deictic shifting in the reader/player. In *The Novelist*, this blended world does not just arise from physical and onscreen action and interaction, but also this title’s narrative point of

view. We enter the gameworld, as outlined earlier, as a 'ghost' and as such we are afforded a privileged omniscient point of view; we can see all the characters, we can listen to their thoughts, and we are the titular novelist.

User naomi in this comment, first describes her playing experience, but what is of interest here for us is the second paragraph where she discusses her position to the story creation:



Figure 71: Steam comment (Naomi 2018)

Naomi has positioned herself as omniscient creator: 'I led him into a successful career'. This repeated use of 'I' together with the imperative,

'let' shows the perceived control this poster has over the world of *The Novelist*. This adds weight to the claim at the opening of this chapter with regard to the player-reader as 'writer'. It would appear that in this title, and for Naomi at least, they are not deictically 'with' the characters as they might be in a literary text, or actively embodied onscreen as with many videogames, but instead here they are the active creator of the storyworld as they might also be within a simulation game like *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2004). Within the general discussions on *The Novelist* Steam forum, *The Sims* is mentioned three times, but these were not part of my data sample, and as interesting as the link between omniscient viewpoints and simulation games may be, it is outside of the parameters for this thesis, but perhaps worthy of future investigation.

Another user, Ziltus, reveals that they rejected the omniscient position provided by being a ghost, and instead took a more focused approach that echoes traditional videogames:

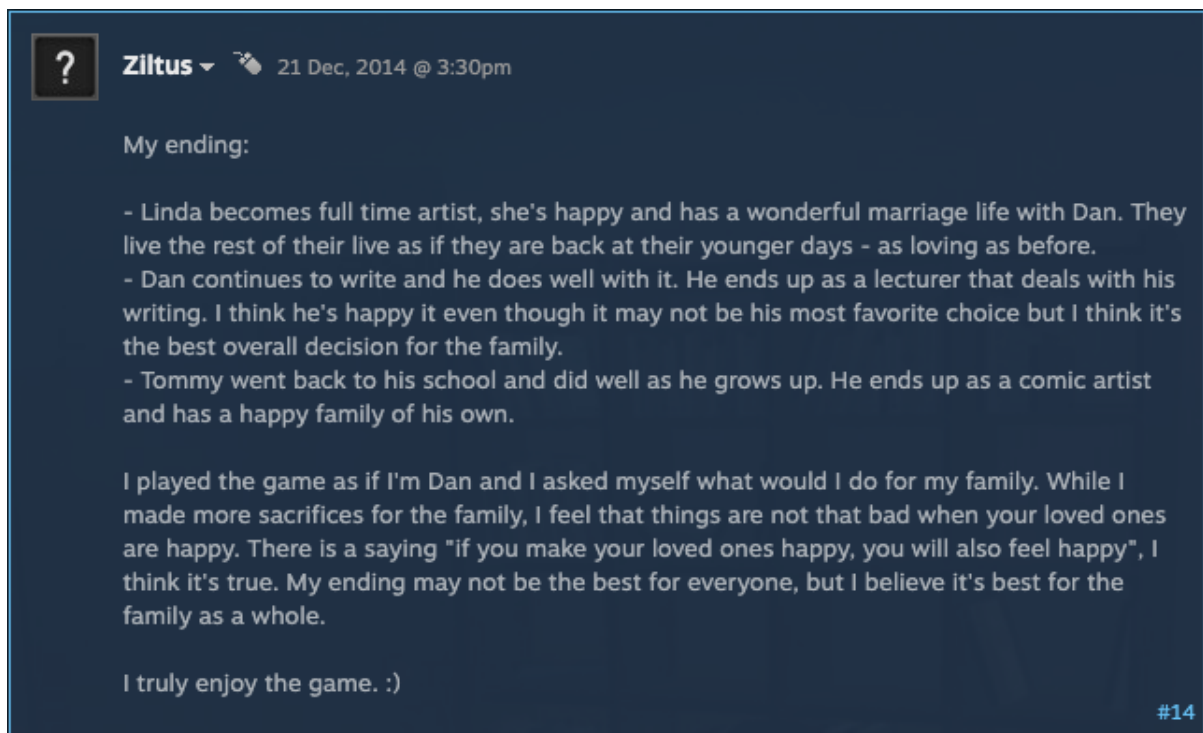


Figure 72: Steam comment (Ziltus 2014)

Ziltus reveals 'I played the game as if I'm Dan' which speaks to close identification with the character and spatio-temporal immersion within the storyworld. It also suggests some distancing; this user has not 'become' Dan, but instead plays a role 'as if' Dan. However, they also say 'I made more sacrifices for the family' which suggests a first-person experience ('I') common to most videogames, yet they are aware of their omniscient position, and here a paternal position.

If we now turn to how personal schemas are reported within the forum, we will see how the interplay of immersion, deictic shift, and schema produce profound effects upon reader/players.

9.6 Schema

As we have seen in the previous case studies personal schemas are activated in two ways in Walking Simulators: the form itself presents opportunities for refreshment and expansion of existing videogame schema at the level of *genre*; the form also presents opportunities for schema activation and refreshment within the storyworld where memories and beliefs may be drawn upon – characteristic of literary reading in Cook's (1994) terms.

As we might expect with a Walking Simulator title there is evidence of schema disruption. *The Novelist* is perhaps the closest of the case studies to a traditional videogame as it offers a game type challenge of sorts (to 'win' by achieving a happy outcome for each character). Following the discussions seen in the previous case studies about game duration and value for money, we might also expect to see something similar in *The Novelist* forum, but this is a little-known title and as such the size of the forum reflects this lack of widespread knowledge and participation. The word 'hour' appeared only 14 times by May 2020, but the comments are mostly as expected about value for money.

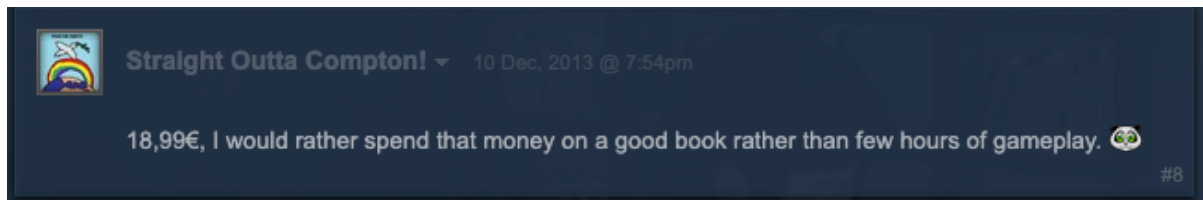


Figure 73: Steam comment (Straight Outta Compton! 2013)

It is notable that this user, Straight Outta Compton!, has drawn a comparison to purchasing a book which suggests that reading is a comparable pursuit to this title and that a book would provide a longer duration of immersion or involvement which suggests that despite their lack of satisfaction with value for money they do recognise this is closer to a literary experience than a gaming one.

More common in *The Novelist* forum are lengthy reports illustrating schema activation arising from the narrative and gameworld that foregrounds the storyworld. *The Novelist* gameworld, as we know, presents a cartoon-like house on a beach which may remind some posters of their similar experiences and thus activate their memory schemas, but it is likely, particularly due to the size of North America (where many posters are likely to live) that many will not have had this experience, and in its place other film and literary experiences are instead activated by the visual setting. This activation of film and literary experiences to provide schema of a large house on a beach where a small family are staying while

the father completes his novel is apparent from some intertextual references made that we have already discussed within the immersion section.

In this comment from user, Wull, we evidence of schema activation (a 'relationship' schema, perhaps) based upon their life experiences he mentions his wife, and within the same thread in a later post references being a father. It is not surprising then that this user would find themselves identifying with the character of Dan, and necessarily reflecting upon their personal schemas that provide the basis for their beliefs:

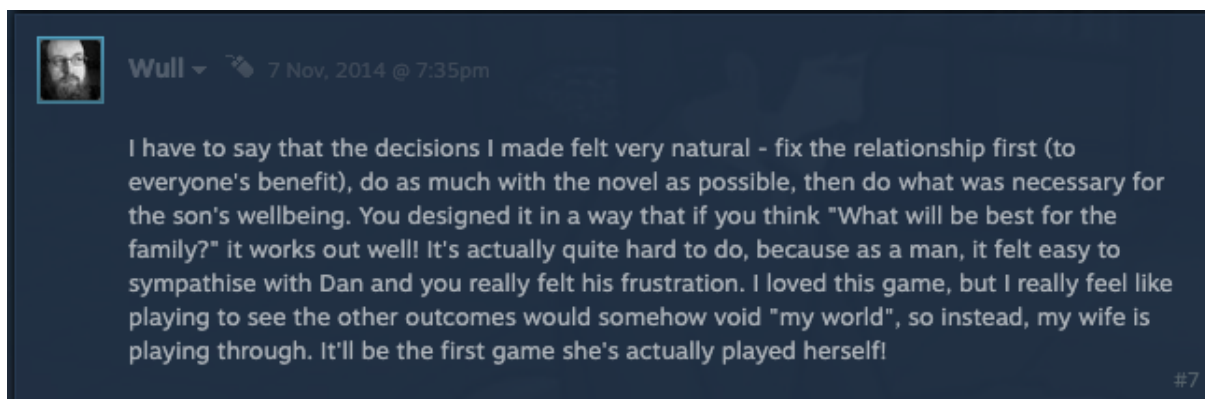


Figure 74: Steam comment (Wull 2014)

This post is a little problematic because of the final remark from Wull about his wife and how this will be the first game 'she's actually played herself' which suggests something of a paternalistic position being taken here by the poster. However, as mentioned previously, this is a

shortcoming of a modified reader response study because we cannot return to the poster and further interrogate their comments as we might have done in a wider reader response-type discussion as suggested by Bell et al in their 2018 article which sets out a cognitive empirical approach for examining immersion in digital fiction by using reader response. Again, this flags up further avenues for research among gamers and those who enjoy Walking Simulators to identify how personal schemas and emotional immersion come into play when faced with titles like *The Novelist* which call upon ethical life choices as part of plotting and story arc and how these features intersect with literary reading.

9.7 Revisiting: Non-Spontaneous and Non-cumulative Interpretations

We have already seen in the previous case studies that Walking Simulators are revisited, like literary texts, for two possible reasons: non-spontaneous interpretation where the reader/player wants to thoroughly

understand the story; or non-cumulative reading where the reader/player returns to experience something akin to comfort reading. If we turn first to non-spontaneous interpretation and where this is most clearly identified is through discussion and interpretation, as we have seen with both *Dear Esther* and *Firewatch*.

The Novelist presents a different experience for participants when compared to *Dear Esther* and *Firewatch* inasmuch as there is a branching narrative offering the appearance of agency to alter the outcome of the story. Participants in *The Novelist* have different experiences of the story which are embedded into the game-mechanics unlike *Dear Esther* which offers a personal reading through multiple randomised texts but crucially the user has no agency, choice, over which text they receive. This agency provided by *The Novelist* affords a greater element of ownership over the story, but this does not entirely result in a greater amount of analysis amongst posters, although there is some, which is outlined below.

Applying the same parameters for word usage that we might associate with literary analysis, as I have done with both the other case studies, here is the comparison with *The Novelist*, and what is most notable here is the lack of terminology and lexis related to literary criticism or interpretation present in the discussion threads, despite the very title being related to

literary writing.

| TERM | Dear Esther | Firewatch | The Novelist |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| Magical Realism | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Metaphor | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| Symbolism | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Narrator | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Personification | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Analogy | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Represent | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| Catharsis | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Consciousness | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Character | 20 | 21 | 14 |

| | | | |
|----------------|----|---|---------------------------------|
| Interactive | 7 | 2 | 1 |
| Nonlinear | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Art | 7 | 1 | Excluded as Linda is an artist. |
| Interpretation | 10 | 2 | 4 |

Table 8: Literary language found in *Dear Esther* compared to *Firewatch* and *The Novelist* Steam forums

My explanation for this lack of literary type terminology indicative of re-interpretation and re-reading in this forum is that, unlike the other two case studies, the increased agency and ability to decide the outcome makes this title more game-like or ludic, and thus the discussions tend to be about mechanics, what works best to gain the 'winning' outcome, and less discussion about interpretations. This is not to say that no analysis or interpretation of the story happens within this forum, and therefore no revisiting for a unity of understanding, but rather that it links to game mechanics, as we see with this post where diegzumillo mentions 'stealth mechanics' which is an optional element of gameplay for this title:

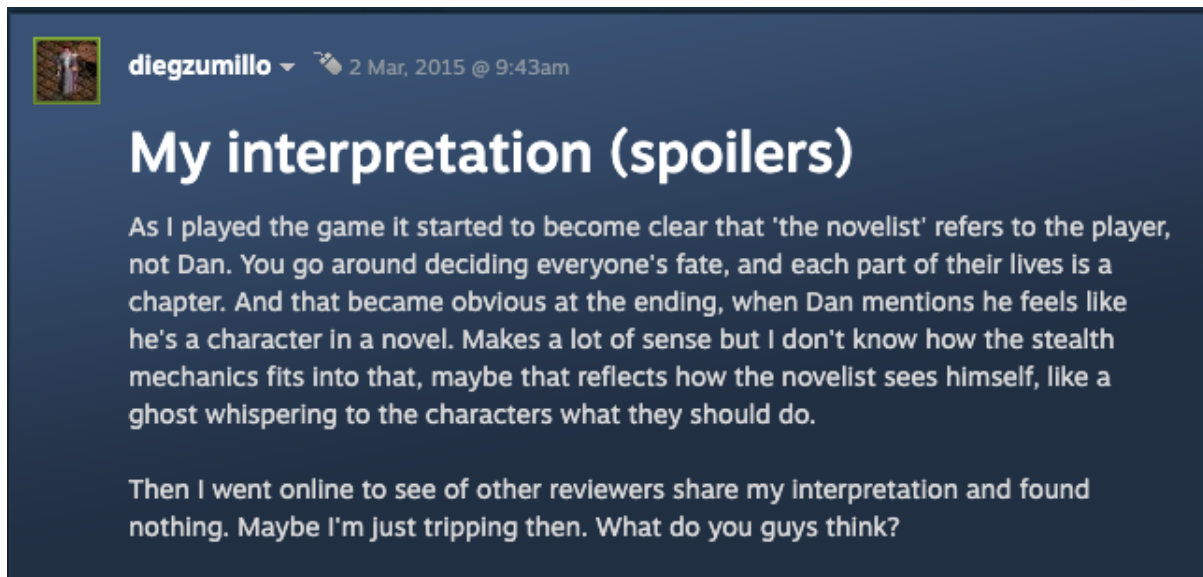


Figure 75: Steam comment (diegzumillo 2015)

The rest of this thread, eight posts in response, discusses the gaming experience and as mentioned earlier, posters' personal experiences in their real life in relation to the storyline. As we also see with part of the post from user Toast (we looked at the beginning of this post in the immersion section) the discussion focuses upon decisions as gamers are very likely to have experienced simulator and strategy games and this is the common approach:

This review is for people who have played the game and possibly the people who made it, if they read this; it's not intended to be a review for anyone who hasn't played it. One thing that I also want to note is that I think the effects of the decisions in the game were not complex enough. There were usually three options, with each being good for one person and bad for the other two. If you had played it right, you could pick two, however I saw many things which I chose because in reality they would have helped more than one of them. For example, I felt that Dan playing the board game thing with Tommy would not only help Tommy, but also Dan, as it would allow him to have time with his son and focus on what's important, and I also thought it would be nice for Linda to see them two playing. I thought it might cheer her up, but there was nothing really to show any of that. Another decision I came across was Linda wanting to go camping and Dan wanting to collect firewood and go camping on the beach. I thought this was great because I could pick either one and they would both be happy, and so I picked Dan's one because I felt like Linda would be happy that Dan actually initiated the camping trip, plus Tommy would have a blast. Turns out she actually wanted to go camping in a different location, and she wanted to go there instead so much so that she left them and went there by herself, spraining her ankle in the process. That kinda baffled me.

Figure 76: Steam comment (Toast 2014)

Toast explains how they 'spent time considering the decisions and what consequences each would have' (see fig.65), which is a common method for chess and similar strategy games, but not what readers experience. Readers may well experience suspense, what, how, why, or who, as Marie Laure Ryan explains, as part of their temporal immersion when they hypothesise on the unfolding plot and final outcome of a text narrative (Ryan 2015: 102-103), but this projection of what might happen is not a strategy that has any effect upon the outcome, instead it enriches the reader experience as they are immersed within the storyworld. The posters of *The Novelist* are primarily immersed within gameworld strategy and how they might attain the best outcome. However, this concern

amongst posters with game strategy has not excluded some literary discussion on the forum, and in this post from user Blackdragon we have a question posed that could easily be straight from a literature essay question:



Figure 77: Steam comment (Blackdragon 2013)

In response this question elicits information from other posters about authors' and their family lives which moves away from interpretation and enters the realms of literary analysis as social history. This flags up the unusual position of *The Novelist* in particular, and, as has been argued throughout this thesis, *Walking Simulators* in broader terms: a storytelling artefact that 'sits' between the ludic and the literary and can

orientate itself towards one end or the other of that cline or spectrum. We have argued throughout that Walking Simulators are literary rather than ludic. However, as argued in this chapter, *The Novelist* is the most 'unliterary' of the titles discussed in this thesis. This raises the question: is it, in fact, in the terms of thesis, a Walking Simulator at all?

To begin to answer that question as to whether *The Novelist* is indeed a Walking Simulator, we need to return to Ensslin's definition of a literary game being one that foregrounds language and has both 'readerly and playerly characteristics' (Ensslin 2014: 1). This title demands that the user engage in the 'playerly characteristics' when they make choices at the end of each section or chapter that then affect the overall outcome of the story. The user arrives at their decision by not only forming opinions based upon their viewing of the characters' behaviour but also by speculating possible effects and outcomes of their choice upon these characters. This speculation is based in the storyworld and its possibilities, although it is through the interface presented within the gameworld that the user acts. There is a concert of gameworld and storyworld within *The Novelist* that is most closely echoed in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and hypertext fiction. This title is undoubtedly a Walking Simulator because it demands users are both engaged readers

and players. However, this also points to the unsatisfactory nature of the name 'Walking Simulator' which leads us to the final chapter of this thesis, Discussions and Conclusions, where their definition is discussed.

Chapter 10 Discussions and Conclusions

10.1 Discussion of general findings

This thesis began with the question: what are Walking Simulators and how do we engage with them as player-readers? My hypothesis was that these titles are a new digital storytelling artefact that are incorrectly classified as videogames instead of being viewed as digital literature. This thesis argued that Walking Simulators occupy a space between literary text and games, or what we might describe as ‘ludic’ experiences. Walking Simulators exhibit both literary and ludic features and are what Ensslin describes as a ‘hybrid subgroup’ that offer both readerly and gamerly experiences for participants (2014: 1). These experiences are activated in participants by the types of **transportation immersion** they offer, which is akin to the experience of literary reading, rather than the more

'mechanical' types of **flow immersion** experienced by the player of video games. Other key terms defined and exemplified have been **gameworld** (the material, digitalised 'realm' of the game itself, and the space with which player-readers interact) and **storyworld** (the cognitive experience of and reaction to the narrative presented through the gameworld).

Walking Simulators are to some extent defined by a foregrounding of the latter over the former (in contrast with more 'traditional' forms of video game).

We saw in chapter 2 that Walking Simulators are in a tradition of text adventure videogames and digital literature. A distinction was drawn there between artefacts that resemble experimental literature, and those which resemble games because they provide an agency of sorts within their gameworlds. The domains of videogames and digital literature are approaching a significant overlap and I suggest that the paths currently being trod by Walking Simulators are the next evolutionary step in this development of digital storytelling.

At a fundamental level, Walking Simulators are not games; we examined aspects of game studies considering videogames in chapter 3 and found that Walking Simulators do not fit the widely established criteria. Games are a structured type of play; they can be categorised into different types,

but none of these can be firmly applied to Walking Simulators because they offer no challenge or chance elements that Caillois calls *agon* and *alea* (1961 trans.: 14). Videogames require specific technology which provides a virtual space onscreen (the gameworld) and this element is certainly shared with Walking Simulators, but this is the only properly shared element. Videogames demand certain elements of cognitive engagement: hyperattention, flow immersion, and an embodied deictic shift into that virtual space of the gameworld where the player has the appearance of agency. Walking Simulators do not offer any of these in quite the same way, and thus have been described by critics (as further evidence of genre schema disruption) as bad games (Rigney (2013), Bogost (2017), Campbell (2016), McGovney (2016)). Walking Simulators are not bad games; they are not games at all. The ‘correct’ critical response would have been to engage in process of schema tuning, and to recognise, as this thesis is attempting to, the emergence of a new hybrid and multimodal storytelling genre.

If Walking Simulators are not games, then what are they? In essence: they are a new form of digital storytelling artefact. We examined those aspects of the ‘materiality’ of literary texts that find parallels in Walking Simulators in chapter 4: narrativity in terms of story structure, and overt

point of view. Walking Simulators build rich and ‘textured’ (Stockwell 2012) storyworlds (cued up cognitively in the manner of text-worlds as generated by monomodal discourse) in the minds of their player-readers, in the same way as literary texts, and this type of cognitive interaction is not an aspect of the onscreen gameworld; it is created through deep engagement and transportation immersion on the part of the player-reader. In *Dear Esther*, these features can be found in the narrative about Esther’s death; in *Firewatch*, Julia’s decline into dementia, and the story of Ron and Dave; in *The Novelist*, in the backstory of the house and its previous occupants. Video games, self-evidently, require forms of cognitive engagement, but of a very different type and order to those demanded by Walking Simulators: *deep* attention, *transportation* immersion, and a *passive* deictic shift.

We have also established two further important elements to explain criticism of Walking Simulators and, importantly, to firmly establish their literariness: schema theory; and rereading for non-spontaneous interpretation. Schema theory (in terms of genre expectations) provided reasonable explanations for players’ frustrations with Walking Simulators: the technical mediality of screen, PC, gaming platform, and so on cued expectations of videogame experiences based upon their gaming genre

schema. These videogaming schemas are then disrupted because Walking Simulators, despite their shared mediality, do not provide challenge, chance, excitement, and so on (the types of flow immersion associated with mechanical action and repetition and, for example, the development and improvement of motor skills required by *agon* type games). Instead, the Walking Simulator offers a narrative experience, rich in multimodal elements yet lacking in gamerly agency beyond simple (slow) movement. Indeed, for many players Walking Simulators are well named as they offer nothing more than a simulation of walking around a space. However, if the player can allow their videogame schema to be refreshed and expanded to take into account a rich interactive storytelling experience that may lack *gamerly* challenge and instead provide *readerly* challenge, then the rewards are great. The case studies prove that those posters prepared to refresh their schemas and engage found richly complex, textured experiences. *Dear Esther* offers multiple text worlds that bear rereading for further interpretations; *Firewatch* challenges (and ultimately usurps) the stereotypically masculine nature (and image) of videogames; *The Novelist* offers opportunities to empathise with a difficult (but by no means uncommon) family situation and its associated dilemmas and tensions, test emotions, ethical positions and beliefs, and to see the

probable outcome of pivotal choices. These ‘texts’, then, provide learning experiences, at the very least arguably, that are comparable in scope and ambition to those provided by canonical literary texts.

The three case studies not only provided examples of narrative-orientated interactive experiences and complex storyworld, but also allowed us to apply a modified reader response methodology to public comments made by those who have experienced Walking Simulators. This supported the hypothesis I put forward: that Walking Simulators are not games. The cognitive experiences reported showed evidence of rereading (or revisiting – and thus, in Furlong’s terms, non-spontaneous interpretation), deictic blending of worlds where posters are simultaneously in the actual world, the gameworld, and the storyworld, and overt instances of schema refreshment – all features of the cognitive aspects of the literary experience. Walking Simulators share a mediality with videogames, but an ‘experience’ with literary texts. Those users who rejected the literary experience were those who found their videogame genre schema disrupted and were not prepared to tune or refresh it. Those willing to engage more flexibly found rich experiences.

10.2 Significance and Implications

To summarise: this thesis put forward support for the argument that Walking Simulators are literary artefacts. This is a small but growing scholarly field established by scholars examining digital literature, as we have seen: Ensslin, Bell, Bozdog, and others. Until now no clear definition of the form has been established beyond 'literary games' (Ensslin 2014: 1), which also took into account other types of interactive fiction rather than only Walking Simulators. This thesis sets out a definition supported by research drawn from the artefacts themselves, and from evidence of the type of cognitive engagement posters report in public gaming forums.

Aside from academic categorisation, this thesis also raises potential implications for the videogame industry and possible developments of benefit to audiences. A well-designed gameworld, as we have seen, can create atmosphere that allows players to easily experience immersion (of whatever type) and offer virtual spaces that encourage revisiting for non-cumulous rereading. In other words, gameworlds offer rich audiovisual

representations that create atmosphere are virtual spaces that people like to spend time in. This suggests that Walking Simulators with simple narratives and high degrees of gameworld verisimilitude could be produced for therapeutic purposes to allow people who might otherwise be unable to visit or revisit actual world locations. A simple Walking Simulator presenting an early or mid-20th century town or village could encourage nostalgia and reflection upon memories in the same way that collaborative multimodal writing projects like *Oldton* (Wright 2013) have done (Nadkarni (2014), Page (2008), Toolan (2009: 132-134)).

The Novelist in particular, also offers a model for creating stories that might help develop empathy or allow reader/players to test out behaviours in various situations. In the same way that the recent award-winning text game *The One Hour Degree* (Webb 2019) allows prospective students to experience a version of university life without risk, Walking Simulators like *The Novelist*, as we have seen, allow reader/players to explore their own opinions and beliefs.

The Novelist offers perhaps the most obvious link to *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories and as such it is surprising that more titles like *The Novelist* have yet to emerge. The method of offering multiple choices for the reader/player to construct their 'own' story would lend itself easily to

transmedial storytelling with existing franchises like *Harry Potter* and similar well-known stories.

10.3 The contribution of this thesis

This thesis supports and furthers a number of scholarly arguments in its findings and thus makes a useful contribution to existing scholarly research in the areas of digital literature and, in terms of readerly behaviour, cognitive poetics.

Dear Esther shows that complex multilayer narratives creating multiple text-worlds encourage personal readings and thus force the player-reader to use more 'readerly' methods to make sense of the story presented. *Dear Esther* offers a storyworld as complex as canonical literary texts, the allusion to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) in the opening scenes being an overt example of intertextuality that already announces this 'literariness' to the player-reader. This title also proves that experimental literature can be created using procedural delivery methods and

materiality of computers and videogames, and crucially, it is possible for them to be commercially successful. Dan Pinchbeck, author and developer of *Dear Esther*, admitted in a recent interview that he wanted to create a videogame that removed everything but the story and *Dear Esther* was the result (Pinchbeck 2019). It is evident from *Dear Esther* that we are readers not players as we lack any true gamerly agency, there is no *agon* or *alea*, all that remains is the intrigue and complexities reminiscent of a literary text. This adventurous exploratory project has inadvertently, it would seem, created **a new genre**.

Keogh's (2015) suggestion that foregrounding the story within the gameworld by providing semiotic cues is supported by evidence found in this thesis: *Dear Esther* begins with the literary effect of pathetic fallacy as the dark skies and brooding atmosphere signal that this will not be a happy story; *Firewatch* shows Henry's wedding ring as he packs up his truck to set off to the forest; *The Novelist* offers less overt signals but does offer a filmic convention of shifting from text (the typewritten titles) to the gameworld which can be read as the player/reader enacting the role of novelist as they make decisions at the end of each day/chapter. This thesis suggests, as Keogh has done, that **foregrounding of story within the gameworld** is a genre convention of Walking Simulators.

Multiple text worlds can be cued up by engagement with Walking Simulators in the same way as complex literary texts; the multimodality offered by the gameworld affords what Rimmon-Kenan calls a 'subsidiary story-line' (2003: 17) we might also term this *superfluous intrigue*, because these are incidental and of a lesser order than a 'subsidiary' as the reader/player can overlook or ignore these elements in Walking Simulators and still enjoy their experience. In *Dear Esther*, the narrative is complex and layered, so the possible additional features of graffiti on walls, paper boats, candles, and the occasional ghost support the main storyline and proves an exception to this rule. *Firewatch* and *The Novelist* offer strong support for the notion of superfluous intrigue as the notes of Dave and Ron in the forest provide us with a story of unrequited love, and the letters and diaries of previous occupants of the beach house provide us with starting points for other stories yet untold. This thesis has argued that **superfluous intrigue** is a genre convention – and thus a defining feature -of Walking Simulators.

Ryan's expansion of Gerrig's transportation metaphor to include spatial, spatio-temporal, temporal, and emotional varieties of immersion (Ryan 2015: 85-114) provided an excellent starting point for examining the forum responses in the case studies, and I have grouped these together under the

heading of **transportation immersion** (to reiterate, as distinct from **flow immersion**). What proved to be most surprising was the overwhelming evidence of emotional immersion in Walking Simulators, particularly empathy which is widely examined in literary studies (Bernaerts (2013), Keen (2006, 2007), Van Lissa et al. (2018), Bal and Veltkamp (2013), Mar et al (2009), Stansfield and Bunce (2014), and so on). Narratives eliciting empathy from reader/players in Walking Simulators produce **the same effects as literary texts**, and this in turn suggests that the commonly held opinion that traditional videogames encourage antisocial behaviour may be offset by well-developed narratives, as Bormann and Greitemeyer have suggested (2015). This presents another area that needs further development and research for Walking Simulators and literary types of gaming more broadly.

The aspects of cognitive poetics that this thesis engages with and contributes to are rereading and deictic shift theory. Furlong's (2008) argument that rereading is not only to clarify meaning in a process of non-spontaneous interpretation but also to experience non-cumulative rereading where the aim is akin to 'comfort reading' (2008: 294) has been confirmed Furlong's argument can be extended into Walking Simulators and possibly videogames too, from the evidence found in the Steam

forums. The evidence in the Steam forums suggests that it is **not only readers but gamers who also revisit** for experiences similar in desired *outcome* to that of the reader: both readers and gamers want achievement (an ‘optimally relevant’ reading (2008: 289), or a perfect score proving mastery); or satisfaction (‘comfort reading’, or nostalgia).

Stockwell’s work goes into considerable detail about the use of language and positioning of the reader with literary texts, and what has been useful within this thesis is the notion of ‘implied reader’ (Stockwell, 2005: 47), in other words, in literary texts we are unable to take on the role of a character, but instead we are the author’s audience. This has been key because by comparison in a videogame we are actors or enactors of the onscreen events; in same way that a literary text is heteronomous (it does not exist for us until we read it and construct it in our imagination), a videogame does not ‘exist’ unless we take part and enact appropriate behaviours which enable the game to reach its conclusion. Both games and stories require our involvement and immersion, but like flow and transportation, they are different. This thesis **expands the types of immersion experienced by players and readers** to include different types of deictic shift related to their positioning and roles within the alternative game or storyworld:

- Transportation immersion where the participant remains a viewer, passive and with no agency within the storyworld; this is the same as standard Gerrig transportation, developed by Ryan to offer the different types of immersion - a **readerly, audience, or passive deictic shift**. This type of deictic shift where one remains passive is the same as that experienced by readers or audiences of films. We are afforded no agency to move or explore as we might in a gameworld, and all that we see is entirely directed by the primary producer of writer, director, developers.

- Transportation immersion where the participant remains a viewer as they have no true agency over the narrative outcome, the storyworld, but they are able to move around the onscreen gameworld - a **participatory semi-passive deictic shift** - commonly seen in Walking Simulators. This is the type of shift experienced in *Dear Esther* as the outcome of reaching the radio mast and launching off from the top if it is unavoidable. We can wander at (limited) will around the onscreen gameworld, stop to admire the view, and revisit areas of the island, but we cannot alter or prevent the final outcome. Our participation is necessary inasmuch as if we leave the gameworld by exiting the software then the conclusion will

not be reached, but this is in common with novels and films. We are able, with traditional media of film and text, to revisit, reread, and reexperience but we cannot alter the outcome. This type of deictic shift in Walking Simulators affords us the additional freedom of limited movement around the gameworld that the text and film does not. We are unable to pause a film or TV show and make the character look out of the window or stop to admire the view. Likewise, a text may suggest a setting that we might further imagine but we are prevented from altering what appears on the page. We may imagine a world where a central character does not die, for example, and how that may affect the plot, and it is here that Fan Fiction develops but it cannot alter the canonical original source text. Walking Simulators offer us the opportunity of some freedom of movement around the gameworld but we are entirely passive in our deictic shift within the storyworld and as such we tend to remain somewhat distanced from the character. When we read novels or watch films we are 'with' the character, we do not become the character, and this is the same with Walking Simulators that offer this type of semi-passive deictic shift.

- Flow immersion where the participant is embodied onscreen within

an avatar, which is often customisable to increase personal involvement and projection - an **embodied active deictic shift** - commonly seen in traditional videogames, particularly first-person shooter type games. Here we still are largely unable to alter the final outcome as we saw with *Firewatch*, Henry leaves the forest and never meets Delilah, no matter our choices. However, in first-person shooter type games that feature a strong narrative thread (titles such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Red Dead Redemption* both from Rockstar Games) we are able to alter our onscreen avatar and choose which parts of the narrative we wish to attend to first. The final outcomes remain the same but set into a larger sprawling world that offers 'missions', again with only a binary outcome of win or lose, the player is easily convinced that the experience is unique and therefore one has considerable agency. However, as discussed earlier, this agency is illusory as it is only possible within the coded boundaries of the game. The appearance of agency is enhanced by our ability as players to enter into forms of onscreen conflict or challenge, in other words, those elements that make it a game.

We saw in the case studies that often player-readers' deictic positioning shifted and remained unfixed or was located within *blended worlds* of

game, story, and their actual world. Herman (among others) has addressed the notion of *double* deixis in narratives (1994), particularly how this enabled by the use of second person address. This thesis provides a starting point for further research on this notion of a **blended deixis experienced with Walking Simulators**.

10.4 The limitations of this thesis

One of the aims of this thesis was to identify *how* Walking Simulators immerse us and a major facet of that was Hayles's notion of hyper and deep attention. As we saw in chapter 3 on games, it was relatively straightforward to exclude Walking Simulators from inciting hyperattention as they tend to offer single streams of information without the challenging pressures of videogames which demand players maintain vigilance throughout. However, *proving* users experienced deep attention and transportation immersion has been somewhat elusive; Steam comments confirm immersion, involvement, and evidence of deictic

shifts, all of which suggests deep attention and transportation immersion but do not necessarily provide conclusive evidence. Further research is necessary to provide cognitive evidence of hyper and deep attention and transportation immersion and then to seek examples of this amongst users enjoying Walking Simulators; it is possible that the use of eye-tracking software and other empirically-rooted methodologies may enable an early feasibility study.

It is a limitation of this thesis that further investigation into other Walking Simulators for more examples of superfluous intrigue has not been explored, and thus conclusively establish this as a genre convention. However, this does suggest a rich area for future research.

This thesis took one possible approach of a modified reader response study to examine how users describe their experiences and thus understand whether it was a more gamerly or readerly one. This approach has limitations: I am unable to easily return to those forum users and ask clarifying questions; would 'non-gamers' have similar reactions to the three titles selected; would different titles provide similar responses, and so on. Also, as flagged up in Chapter 5, the Steam forums provided the raw data for user opinions but it is a commercial platform where each user has purchased not only the attendant equipment but also the titles. A

perhaps fairer, or at least offering a potentially wider pool of user opinions would be to draw independently collected data from different geographical and social areas. Likewise, as mentioned in Chapter 5, what to call those experiencing Walking Simulators remains unresolved. Undoubtedly the cognitive experience is more readerly yet, common parlance terms anyone using gaming consoles or platforms like Steam, Gamers.

Overall, the suggested framework for Walking Simulator stylistics would benefit from further testing with other titles to 'fine-tune' it with application of a more traditional reader response study where participants would be 'true' participants who have given informed consent, thus avoiding problems around calling them participants/users/posters. However, this has proved a useful starting point.

10.5 Questions for further research

This thesis's attempt to re-situate Walking Simulators as a new, literary and digital storytelling artefact, in many respects, raises more questions and opens further lacunae. Walking Simulators need greater scholarly attention. Walking Simulators, if located in a domain between videogames and literary texts and exhibiting more features of the latter than the former, also share mediality with videogames, and narrativity with literary texts. Posters regard themselves as players, but their cognitive processes are those employed with literary texts – thus, the hybrid term adopted here: player-readers. While it is unlikely that the gameplaying public and associated media will alter their classification any time soon, this thesis does point to the need for further research into Walking Simulators and how we engage with them cognitively. Walking Simulators themselves offer a large amount of potential investigation areas: the notion of loss; intertextuality; relationships between the form

and issues of gender identity; the operation of humour and so on, in addition to those questions raise earlier within this chapter.

Walking Simulators remain under-researched despite the growing number of titles and the importance of videogames within contemporary culture. The importance of the work of scholars like Bell, Ensslin, and Ryan cannot be overstated, and it is hoped that this thesis will make its own contribution to this burgeoning area of scholarly investigation. To summarise: this thesis issues a rallying cry to literary studies, asking it to embrace and interrogate new and expanding forms of digital storytelling like the Walking Simulator.

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Appendices






Appendix 1: Dear Esther Steam Comments






| Post Number | Comment | T/I | H | P/C |
|-------------|---|--|---|-----|
| 1.5 | its atmosphere, music and the beautiful recreation of a Scottish island (which reminds me of the Antrim coast of Northern Ireland where I come from) wins the day. |  | | |
| 2.0 | <p>This game affects my mental health</p> <p>I'm not sure in a good way or not. I have suffered from depression on and off for years, and when I get into a really dark place, I will sometimes play this game. The overwhelming sense of loneliness and mystery calls to me, but I don't know if it does me any good to immerse myself into it. The music and atmosphere make me feel almost ill, but I can't ever seem to get that horizon, the abandoned island or the rotting ships and buildings out of my head. I feel like I left myself somewhere in this game with the narrator.</p> <p>It's a really incredible game but it frightens me somehow, the way it affects my mind.</p> |  | | |
| 3.0 | <p>The ending, and meaning of Dear Esther explained!</p> <p>I think that you were a seagull the entire time. That explains the magical realism because seagulls see things differently than humans. That is why at the end you were a seagull.</p> |  | | |
| 3.8 | I just finished it and no idea what was going on. Did we die in a car accident or something? Seemed to me like you had some sort of unfinished business and the island was some sort of purgatory. I have no idea but a few times when i drowned etc he would say "come back" and again at the very end of the game. Is it an island for lost souls? |  | | |
| 3.14 | <p>the island is a metaphor for how we truly are alone and how a life of solitude and regret will lead to your demise. the seagull was the expression of how the man in the game killed himself to stop his pain in the world: his regret, how the person he loved so dearly died while he was delusional and unable to see her one last time. he becomes an alcoholic and is unhappy with himself, so he writes letters to himself hoping that seeing his words written on paper would ease his pain, but it did not. the seagull flying was a symbolism of his life being whisked away to the clouds where the gulls fly, and the clouds float. as his new body leaves this island he goes off into the gleaming moon light as his vision fades.</p> <p>that's my interpretation of it.</p> |   | | |
| 3.28 | <p>After playing through the game and reading people's speculations and commentary, these are the things that I've seen and the three story paths that I could see as being plausible.</p> <p>The story was intended to be vague, the clues sparse, randomly doled out and inconsistent. The narrator is also in a state of dementia brought on by some mix of emotional trauma, isolation, laudanum and/or alcohol induced stupor along with other physical side effects of the car crash which started the story. The narrator's account is suspect and he is also desperately searching for some meaning behind the event, which leads him to make several inferences and to combine and blur details. This all adds up to multiple interpretations as there is a lack of concrete evidence to</p> |   | | |






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| <p>refute many of the hypotheses.</p> <p>Near the beginning, but just off the beaten path is a Fibonacci spiral. It's a repeating pattern which spirals in or out on itself. It could represent the player's repeated journeys through the island, each time recovering a little more of what happened. It could also represent the Narrator's spiral into madness or his need to keep revisiting and turning over the events in his mind until he comes to peace. Either way, this spiral, this potentially infinite loop is the essence of the game. The way I see it, the player could either be the grief-stricken demented Narrator who is trapped in an endless spiral and seeking meaning and purpose or the player could be Esther herself.</p> <p>The other people in the story may be real or they may be personifications of parts of the Narrator's personality or they may be superpositions of the Narrator's personality onto people who actually did exist.</p> <p>Jacobson is a man who had hopes of striking out and building a life for himself and finding a wife- however he instead dies alone because of a disease. He is either a historic figure or an analogy for the narrator's hopes which died with his wife and unborn child. The narrator mentions that he has a disease which is not of the flesh and there are suggestions that it may be a drinking problem. If so, then it is that disease (alcoholism) which is responsible for the Narrator dying alone. The Narrator cannot find the precise location of the crash when he searches in real life which might lend credence to the Narrator being affected by laudanum or alcohol before the crash.</p> <p>Donnelly seems to represent pessimism and bitterness. He sees the worst in others and focuses on painstakingly noting all the details of the forsaken island he is living on. In the history, his character emerges as Jacobson dies.</p> <p>Paul is either the other person involved in the crash or he may represent the Narrator's denial and his subsequent attempt to start a new life. He starts devolving into panic when confronted with the reality of Esther's death. In the bible Saul changes his name to Paul when he has a life changing experience and becomes a new and better man. The Narrator's dialogue tells us that Paul was quickly weathered under his sense of guilt and the weight of responsibility. Ultimately Paul was also unsuccessful and died (or was let go) also. The Narrator misses him.</p> <p>Paul and the road to Damascus: The biblical verses to this story are referenced. Mainly that Saul was on his way to Damascus and then he was struck and blinded by a bright light. I believe that all of the references to the biblical story of Paul came as a result of the Narrator's desperate search for any shred of purpose or deeper meaning in the whole event. Similar parallels can be drawn to his fascination with parallel lines (which were crossed before the crash) or the number 21 which occurred multiple times during the ordeal and he now describes a significance to.</p> <p>Pictures and diagrams</p> <p>There are three types of neurons displayed, a cortical neuron which is used for awareness and thinking; a sensory neuron; and a perkinje neuron, which regulates motor movement and is responsible for making corrective adjustments to motor</p> | | | |
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| | <p>actions. Also, the chemical structures for ethanol (alcohol) and dopamine are shown in several diagrams. Dopamine is a side effect of morphine and several other painkillers, including ones given to people with kidney stones. Both are addictive, impairing and they compound their effects if taken together.</p> <p>Bacteria paintings could be a reference to the infection in the Narrator’s fractured leg- or they could be the bacteria which produces alcohol. If so, then it would explain why the paintings shortly before the cut scene of the crash/hospital room were a fusion of bacteria, neurons, alcohol and an emergency brake switchboard. A demonstration of all of the scientific reasons for why the crash happened. Potentially showing that either a drunk Paul or drugged Narrator could’ve crossed lanes and neither was in a position to properly respond and make adjustments in time. In addition, the brakes seem to have failed on one of the vehicles.</p> <p>The island is clearly not real and the resultant journey is not a physical one as evidenced by the fact that you can’t die and will be returned if you attempt to leave. It also explains the unearthly cave system, ghosts, candles, bioluminescent paint, fungi and the voice of the Narrator.</p> <p>But what is the island and who is the player? The Narrator says that he knows the island well enough to traverse it blindfolded. I believe that he also says in one of his snippets that Esther is also familiar with the island and that they visited together. In another he says something which could be interpreted as stating that he is the island. To me the barren island represents the memories and emotional state of the player, who is trapped and reliving the events which destroyed their life and left them stranded and alone.</p> <p>The event which started all of this was a car crash which either killed Esther or left her in a near death coma. Esther was pregnant and married to the Narrator, who is heartbroken and cracking as a result. You can see a hint about this whenever you go completely underwater in the ocean: The screen seems to change to an ultrasound picture and when you’re at risk of drowning the Narrator tells you to come back and you reappear at shore. There is also a photograph of an ultrasound located in the cave. The fact that the ultrasound pictures prevent the player from leaving is evidence of the importance which the player places on his or her unborn child.</p> <p>If the player is the Narrator then the island represents his depression and feelings of total isolation. The guilt the Narrator harbors over his lost child is also a major element of what is keeping the player bound to the island. He either sought it out physically after the crash because it reminded him of his wife and he wanted the isolation because he couldn’t cope or his dementia brought him there. If he went there physically then he has since died from a fractured leg and starvation and continues to haunt it until he finds catharsis and a meaning behind the events. If he is the player, then at the end he reaches the highest point of the island and then turns into a seagull and flies away. Symbolically leaving behind the guilt and loneliness which is binding him in his current state.</p> <p>Right before that he talks about becoming an island which rises and becomes a radio tower which will not forget her. If he physically intact during the game and this entire journey was only in his mind then it means that he achieved catharsis and he decides</p> | | | |
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| | <p>to live and move on. The narrator talked about the letters he wrote which he turned into boats and sailed into the Atlantic, essentially letting go of the pain. However, he also talked about seeing Esther on the other side of the waterlogged paper and said that when it disintegrated they would be reunited. If the Narrator did physically come to the island, then he died and his ghost has been haunting the island until he learned to forgive himself. Now that he has he can finally move on and be reunited with her.</p> <p>However, if the player is Esther then the island represents her consciousness trapped because of her coma and the last remnants of her connection to life- and her body which is too damaged to save. Saving her child is what is driving Esther to not let herself give in and die, even though she and the Narrator both know she won't make it. If this is the case then the Narrator is reading her all of the stream of consciousness letters which he has saved up in a last attempt to reach her while he is struggling to hold it together. This is why he says come back any time the player is about to die. In fact, the last thing that you hear is the Narrator saying "come back" before the screen goes black and you hear the final sound of a heart monitor flat lining. In the end she realizes that there is nothing that she can do and allows herself to pass on after her husband finds some measure of peace.</p> | | | |
| 4.0 | <p>Dear Esther Meaning</p> <p>IMO, Dear Esther is about a man (Donnelly) who has a car accident with another drunk driver (Paul Jakobson) and loses his wife (Esther) to a coma and then eventually death, Donnelly although making peace with Paul cannot get past the grief of losing his wife and becomes addicted to his medication. Paul eventually dies from a weak heart and as Donnelly contemplates life without Esther he takes his own life in a hope to be with his beloved again.</p> <p>Basing the Story on the above premise leads me to the below elaboration. The player starts out on an Island, an Island which is made up of the culmination of Donnelly's deep grief induced madness and his eventual disconnecting from society. As the player moves through the island, cryptic poetry unfolds to show us that some form of motor accident had occurred. As we move deeper into the Island we metaphorically move deeper into the mind of Donnelly, we hear of his relationship with Esther and his continual search for answers to why the accident happened. Donnelly continues to visit Esther every day while she is in hospital, eventually Esther dies. Donnelly is stricken with grief of his loves death; he withdraws from society and becomes a hermit. As he was nursing a serious leg injury from the crash, Donnelly becomes addicted to his pain medication and starts quick descent into depression. Donnelly decides to meet up with Paul to make peace with him, but Paul isn't coping with what he had done either, he swears to Donnelly that he wasn't drinking when the accident happened, but Donnelly continues to try and find the truth. Donnelly tries to look to religion for comfort but they are unable to give him the support he needs, he rejects the help they try to give over and over and eventually they give upon him. Months go by and Paul is not doing well, They meet up again to see if they can give each other support, but it is obvious that Donnelly still believes that Paul was drunk when he hit them. Paul, having an apparent heart condition, partly from his old age, has a heart attack at home and dies. Donnelly, now having lost his last connection to his wife through Paul, spirals even deeper into addiction, and starts to lose his connection to reality. He continues to write his thoughts down and sends them home as if Esther will be there reading them, even though he knows that she is dead. He realises that Paul hadn't been drunk at all but he had suffered a heart attack at the wheel, it was</p> |  | | |

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| | <p>his weak heart that caused this tragedy. Donnelly believes that this was all in fate that this had happened, that his wife had died. In his delirium from pain medication, he hobbles to a tall radio tower, he makes his peace with the world, he looks forward to seeing his wife again, he jumps.</p> <p>A Sad story about a man who could not live without his love, Esther.</p> <p>Obviously I condensed the story, as there are heaps of extra things that are mentioned like his children for example.</p> <p>But what are peoples thoughts? Am I Right? Do you agree? I NEED CLOSURE!</p> | | | |
| 4.1 | <p>I agree with you about there being a car accident, but I don't think the character you control is involved in it. I think it's just Paul and Esther. During the game, you character says something about "I met Paul. We drank coffee and tried to connect. Although he knew I hadn't come in search of an apology, reason or retribution, he still spiralled in panic." It gave me the impression that this meeting was their first time actually seeing eachother in person.</p> <p>And as fas as Donnelly being hospitalized. He had kidney stones, which was probably what he was taking the medication for - "I had kidney stones, and you visited me in the hospital. After the operation, when I was still half submerged in anaesthetic, your outline and your speech both blurred. Now my stones have grown into an island and made their escape and you have been rendered opaque by the car of a drunk."</p> |   | | |
| 4.2 | <p>I was beginning to think i was too late on the dear esther band wagon, thanks for commenting!</p> <p>You make a good point, i guess its possible that because of the traumer Donnelly and Paul never met at the scene of the accident, but again he may have still been in hospital during the accident.</p> <p>What about the rest, do you agree? the heart attack?</p> |  | | |
| 4.3 | <p>I just found the following site, that lists all of what's said while playing "Dear Esther" -</p> <p>http://dearesther.wikia.com/wiki/Dear_Esther_Script</p> <p>Reading the dialogue a little more carefully this time. My opinion about what happened has changed a little.</p> <p>There are so many parts in the dialogue where your character switches between 3rd person and 1st person, so it "very easily" gets confusing about who he's referring to. This is my best attempt at reading over the dialogue on the above link, and finding out what happened.</p> <p>Your character had a previous hospital stay, where he was recovering from kidney stones. He gets a visit from Esther while he's still affected by the anesthetic, and is only able to barely recognize who she is. He's on the mend, and is given medication to help with the pain. He's let out of the hospital. Within a couple days of getting out of the hospital, him and Esther are driving, and get hit by Paul. Esther dies at the scene. Paul dies, but is brought back to life 21 minutes later. Your character "sees" Paul at the accident, but whether or not Paul sees you is never specifically stated. You two don't "officially" meet until later. Your character survives the accident, but I'm</p> |   | | |

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| | <p>guessing that he now probably is suffering from a lot of mental trauma, given the circumstances. Due to the mental trauma, at times, he thinks that him and Donnelly are two different people (which is why Esther also has the last name 'Donnelly'). He meets up with Paul on "at least" two different occasions after the accident. The first time when they're having coffee, the second time is when he says, "In my final dream, I sat at peace with Jakobson and watched the moon over the Sandford junction, goats grazing on the hard shoulder, a world gone to weed and redemption." There are a couple times during the game where your character references kidney stones, which makes me think that, some time after the accident, your character starts getting kidney stones again. And if it's true that your character and Donnelly are one and the same, he's also suffering from Syphilis.</p> <p>The grief from Esther's death, along with the pain from the recurring kidney stones and syphilis, my guess is that your character ended up taking his own life. ("I have run out of places to climb. I will abandon this body and take to the air.")</p> | | | |
| 4.4 | <p>Yes, that's the site I used to compile my ideas.</p> <p>It seems we completely agree on the story, however what passage of script makes you believe Esther died at the scene? I'm interested to know because I was sure I read that Donnelly made repeated visits to Esther in hospital.</p> <p>Also what did you glean from part in the game when you are at the beach where the paper boats are and you find 3 eggs? You also find 3 broken eggs before that..... was she pregnant or what?</p> |  | | |
| 4.5 | <p>When your character says, "Dear Esther. Whilst they catalogued the damage, I found myself afraid you'd suddenly sit up, stretch, and fail to recognise me." I interpreted that as meaning that she passed away at the scene.</p> <p>The paper boats that you see are supposed to represent the letters that your character wrote (and wanted to give) to Esther - "I collected all the letters I'd ever meant to send to you. Then I took each and every one and I folded them into boats. I folded you into the creases and then, as the sun was setting, I set the fleet to sail." My guess is that him sending the letters away like that is his way of finally being able to accept the fact that she's gone, and that he's able to move on. To me, the eggs represented that they wanted kids, but because of the accident, they never had the chance.</p> |   | | |
| 4.6 | <p>Yes after re-looking at the monologue I can see I made the hospital coma out of thin air!</p> <p>I guess I just saw what I wanted to see.</p> <p>Yeah that's also along the same line as my thoughts, well I guess I'll wait for others to stumble upon this and tell me what they deciphered.</p> <p>Thanks :)</p> |  | | |
| 4.14 | <p>Here's some archived notes by Dan Pinchbeck, they suggest that while the whole story is deliberately ambiguous and often misleading, it's to suggest the unraveling of the narrator's mind, that he may in fact be Paul, and responsible for the very accident that killed Esther. (Seagull smashed into his windshield, he had a heart attack) He may also be dead or in a coma.</p> <p>http://web.archive.org/web/20140711012000/http://thechineseroom.co.uk/blog/so</p> |  | | |

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| | me-old-dear-esther-archive-stuff/ | | | |
| 4.15 | <p>I thought that the big Shyamalan-esque twist of the story is that even though you naturally assume the player-character is both the author and speaker of the monologues, the PC is actually just reciting the monologues someone else wrote down.</p> <p>That led me to believe that the PC isn't actually Donnelly (Esther's husband), but rather is Paul. Because otherwise I don't see how the little paper boats are already there when he finally made his way to the other side of the island.</p> |  | | |
| 4.18 | <p>It's implied that the narrator IS Donnelly, and that he is in fact Paul Donnelly, and Ester is his wife. He caused her death in the accident, and has spilt the persona of Paul away to deal with his own guilt. Guilt that is misplaced because his car was hit by a seagul, and he had a heart attack. The big question then is, is he dead and in purgatory, or is he in a coma and reliving his inner trauma over and over.</p> <p>Mind you, you have to dig into the developer comments and blogs to get all that. The story itself is as ambiguous as it gets.</p> |  | | |
| 4.19 | <p>My guess is that narrator's name is indeed Donnelly, Esther (Esther Donnelly, he calls her in the last scene sometimes) and Paul is the driver who caused the accident, , during which Esther died. Paul was dead, but then brought back to life (and here the situation is rather unclear, because sometimes narrator says about heart massage made with stones, which brought Paul back to life after 21 minutes of clinical death, and sometimes - that it was improvised defibrillator from car engine, and it took 21 tries to start Paul's heart with it).</p> <p>Esther was cremated. Narrator stole some ash and kept it. These ashes became some kind of talisman.</p> <p>Narrator is indeed suffering form mental trauma, he couldn't find a place in life without Esther, but then once he visited library and found a book, written by his namesake, Donnelly. The book was about an island, which is the main setting to the game.</p> <p>Narrator stole the book and departed to the island. If he made it there, it is rather unknown: though he tells about his arrival, and details of his life on the island, they are a bit blurred and do not go well with each other.</p> <p>Jacobson is, probably, the last man who lived on the island, he built a bothy and brought some goats, became a shepherd, but then he died because of disease. Why does he got so much attention then? Well, narrator lives in the bothy he built and reads of his life, but also, apparently, Jacobson's name was Paul too O_O</p> <p>In the end narrator mixes all names and stories into one surrealistic construct and it's hard to get to the truth (if there is any). He mentions parallels between his story, and what was happening on the island long ago, composing colourful statements in which these stories are mixed. So the one true picture is hard or even impossible to get...</p> |   | | |
| 4.21 | <p>After listening to the Director's Commentary on the Landmark Edition, it seems like there really is no one concrete answer as far as to what the storyline is supposed to be about. They intentionally made the stroyline to be ambiguous/vague, and wanted there to be multiple interpretations of it, so people would have discussions like this</p> |  | | |

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| | <p>about what there interpretations were of the story.</p> <p>Which is one thing I really enjoy(ed) about this game. Being able to chat with others who have played the game and see how other interpretations of the game compared to mine.</p> | | | |
| 5.3 | Stop thinking of it as a videogame and start thinking of it more as a walk in the forest, a movie, or a trip to a museum. |  | | |
| 5.6 | To enjoy it, to let your mind run free, to think. to speculation. Its rare for games to ask this of its players. That is one of the reasons why this isnt for everyone. |  | | |
| 5.14 | This is NOT a game. This is an interactive experience or a lucid dream. Its a vacation from reality. It is atmosphere, it is mystery, it is exporation and questions and then an answer. Its one of my favorite places to be. Notice I didn't say its my favorite game to play. |  | | |
| 6.0 | why do i want to play this game whan i feel down or fed up :/ really dont no why but wen i feel bad i want to play this game dose any one els feel this way |  | | |
| 6.6 | Oddly I found (after it made me cry, too much feels) that, much like a poster above me, I appreciated what was important to me with a little more clarity. At least in the short term. More feels than most movies, with better writing :''(' |  | | |
| 7.0 | <p>(SPOILERS)My Theories about Dear Esther and my Experience with it</p> <p>This is one of my favorite works of interactive literature. I hesitate to call it a game, but the story on it's own is still quite good.</p> <p>Dear Esther is a wonderful cautionary tale about grief and obsession. Grief is a powerful emotion, one that is a vital part of the human experience. Losing a loved one is a moment we will all deal with someday. It's tempting to hold on to that grief because it can feel like you are letting go of the person if you let the grief go. This is a dangerous urge. You have to heal, to accept what's happened and move on. If you don' that grief will eat you alive.</p> <p>I first played Deat Esther just after my mother died. I wasn't in a good place then. I really had hit rock bottom and if my two best friends hadn't moved in with me for 2 months, I probably would have killed myself. It spoke to me on a deeply personal level. Sometimes I thought the Narrator was stealing the thoughts right of out my head.</p> <p>Now on the theories.</p> <p>I think that the names Esther Donnelly and Paul Jakobson are accurate, not just figments of the Narrator's fractured psyche. Donnelly was actually Esther's maiden name and Paul's last name was Jakobson.</p> <p>During the accident, Paul is drunk. However, through a clever subterfuge or just dumb luck, he somehow evades being charged with drunk driving. This is the reason for Paul's erratic behavior when the Narrator visits him. Paul knows that the Narrator knows he was drunk.</p> <p>After the accident, the Narrator was unable to let go of Esther. This is indicated by his theft of her ashes and the way he held on to this last, remaining piece of her for years by his own admission. His inability to cope with Esther's loss drove the Narrator into strange obsessions. He became obsessed with Numerology and Nominology and</p> |  | | |









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| | <p>desperately sought to make sense of something which is, by definitions senseless. You can see this evidenced in his obsession with the number 21 and Donnelly.</p> <p>The Narrator is aware that Esther's ancestor wrote a book about a lonely island in the Hebrides. So he resolves to visit this island in an attempt to re-connect with Esther in some way. On the trip there, he stops in the Essex library and finds a copy of "A Hebridean History" and in the pages of that book, he finds the story of a shepard with the same last name as Paul Jakobson.</p> <p>This pushes the Narrator over the edge. Suddenly, he has found something he can seize on as proof that there is some greater destiny behind Esther's demise. The Narrator is obsessed with the island because it is a point in history in which Ester's past and Paul's were intertwined. The Narrator convinces himself that, if he goes to the island and figures out the right ritual, he can re-unite with Esther in some way. Perhaps contacting her in the spirit world or maybe even re-writing history. The Narrator makes statements at several points comparing the fabric of time to a page in a book. A page he feels can be re-written.</p> <p>Obviously, none of this works. These are desperate ideas born of a grieving and broken soul.</p> <p>In the end, unable to cope with the cold hard reality of Esther's death and trapped in a Purgatory of his own making, the Narrator throws himself from the aerial to his demise.</p> | | | |
| 8.0 | <p>What the hell... ...did I just play?</p> <p>That was one of the most confusing and frustratingly nonlinear things I've ever played.</p> | | | |
| 9.0 | <p>Dear Esther Review or Experience Death</p> <p>Art is always a description of our world. And a good piece of art is always a new description of our world. Thousands years ago we lived on a dish plane, floating over infinite universal ocean. We were the center and we were heroes. And there were Achilles and Odyssey. Time had passed and we found out there's a righteous God abides somewhere at the heavenly clouds and simultaneously there's a malicious Devil at the underground roots of volcanoes in the ocean of fire. Heroes transformed into faithful honorable knights, slaughtering hundreds of damned unbelievers in the name of the true God. Not so long time ago we assumed that we might be all alone in the endless space of uncountable galaxies, there's no God, no Devil, no afterworld. Heroes have become a forever suffering philosophers, steppenwolves. There's no good or bad, there's no reward in afterlife, but is there anything hiding on the other side of our dreams? Is there anything awaiting us when our heart finally stops? And fears came out with Edgar Poe and Howard Lovecraft stories. And even unexplored cosmos is greeting us with hostile predators and xenomorphs. Thankfully all those creatures and living nightmares are just a few of answers among thousands of different possibilities what is out there, what is beyond...</p> <p>Here we are at the island. So solitary and desolated that our only friend and companion is our mind. It takes a few minutes to realize that we are finally free of thoughts about our colleges, our subordinates and superiors, our friends and girlfriends, our parents. It's surely not a vacation at the tropical beach we were</p> |  | | |







planning for the next summer. There's no bikini girls to stare at. But we are staring at the dusk and what should be the most everyday-common thing now perceived like a never-seen-before miracle. We are slowly climbing the stairs, overgrown with weeds and flowers. And rhythmically swaying grass in the wind do catches our attention. Stop! It can't be happening!?! Is not the grass in the wind anything that could not ever catch out attention? It's not an important thing like a traffic light or a sealed envelope with a monthly salary!!! These stones and sand and waves and flowers and stairs and meaningless lighthouse are just nothing! They are of no importance!!! But they are kinda peaceful nothing, soothing nothing, restful nothing... what is that out there I see? Someone painted something on the beach sand. I do not understand... what is that formula on the stone I found? Damn chemistry! And by the way what these standing stones themselves are? Seems like it's something ritual, something like a burial grounds. Is anything horrible awaits for me somewhere out there? But strangely it doesn't feels creepy. This crystal clear tiny brook, streaming in between the cold stones, babbles very nicely and makes this deserted place a welcome one... yeah, but... where the hell am I? Seems like nobody is going to answer as long as I am all alone here. Donnelly? Sounds very familiar. Esther? What a lovely romantic name. Should I know it? Dear Esther. What can I tell you? My own thoughts and memories are messed like a... wait... what's that out there? The remains of the crashed boat on the rocks! That's how I got here!!! That's why I don't remember anything! We crashed and I might hit my head and... just a moment... is not that fishing boat crashed here a million years ago? It looks so aged and rusted. So that's not an answer. Should I be surprised? Somehow I knew there would be no easy answers. But do I have any questions? I am sure there's a question, flickering inside my head like a red light dot of a far-away radio-tower. But I can't clearly formulate and pronounce-aloud that question... not yet... if this whole voyage could be a game I presume that the goal would be to always keep on trying to clearly formulate and pronounce-aloud that question. But this is not a game. I am all alone and here's nobody to play with.





Do you mind walking around with me? Whom am I talking to? Am I inviting my own self for a walk? A yellow light beacon is floating not so far from the shore. Whom does it call or warn? Huge cargo ship, heavily distorted by a crash. Rusted and aged and overgrown with grass and flowers as everything else out here. There's nothing interesting there... and... the more I walk around here the island the more I realize that I am myself is the most interesting attraction and puzzle here. I do not even remember when I was completely alone. One on one with myself. Isn't it a type of a dialogue I was missing for years? What do you want? What do you think should you do tomorrow? Tomorrow and after tomorrow. How do you want to live and... wait... no... that question... later... I'd better go to investigate that house on the hill, impressively glowing red in the lights of the sunset. Nothing there, as always. Just a pack of the musical notes, unfinished melodies. Isn't it a grave behind the house? When I was young I also saw my future as a musician. But it didn't happen. A lot of what I was dreaming of when I was young didn't happen. This house and the grave are like my own forgotten unrealized dreams. Metaphorically this whole island is like a... once again... that question... do I really need to answer it? Surely I can do that later. What's that down there? Looks like a whale skeleton. But it's just another one crashed ship on the beach. This island is full of crashes... crash... hm... later. There's a cave entrance, calling me with it's songs...






Wait a second!?! I am sitting in front of a computer. Right? And I have wasted my money on buying a new game. So what am I doing? Am I sitting in front of a computer

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| <p>at home and playing a game? Everything is vice versa!?! I am not playing the game and contrary the game forced me to play with myself. I am playing with my own dreams and thoughts and subconsciousness. That's ridiculous!!! There's nothing happening, there're no cutscenes, there're no enemies, there're no riddles, there's nothing at all except the landscape. Also there's a question. Not even so intriguing, not so mysterious, just a question that screaming aloud for an answer... but... oh... and I know the answer.</p> <p>The moment of death is a miracle. The same unrepeatable miracle as the moment of getting born. And it becomes clear when you enter the caverns of shimmering lights and unearthly colors. I am dead and I was always dead. The very first step on the shore of this deserted island was a very first step to the other side. And simultaneously this other side is deep inside. This place is full of crashed dreams and finally I got crashed myself. That's the answer. Momentary death in a crash. What do you think my dear Esther? Is not that island what I was in life and that's my way to the afterlife? And right now I am here at the most indescribably beautiful part of myself, at the caverns of subconsciousness. The incredible maze of unpronounced thoughts and unrealized dreams. The source of all the tiny brooks, of all the rivers and lakes, of the endless ocean of the imagination. Esther, my dear, I wish I could show you this hidden part of myself. Isn't it too late? What I was thinking about when I was alive? Where's my time? How could I crash all those tiny boats and gigantic ships? It's a little bit frightening how easily we could get lost in the caves. But isn't it exactly what do I want to right now? To get lost and roam forever. The water is flowing and I am following it's breeding streams. The spiral of waterfalls. The downward spiral that leads upwards. Look up and stare at the lights, stop and stare at your final destination...</p> <p>Could this all be just those infamous 3 minutes, when the human body is already dead and brains are still living? Or could this be a vision of the Limbo? And am I supposed to walk through that modern Limbo to get to Heaven? Could this be a... it could. There's a lot of possibilities what exactly this island is about. The only thing I am sure about is that it's not a game. And I believe that it's the most interesting game possible. That's not a game leading into an imaginary world of intriguing events and characters. And that's the game leading you to your own story. This is the virtual world that forces you to see your own world, the world of yourself. That's not what games are supposed to be. But that is what art is supposed to be. "Dear Esther" is a new description of our world. "Dear Esther" is a new metaphor of what is our universe and what is beyond and what is inside of us. "Dear Esther" forces, disturbs and leads you to become not a player, but an author. There's no other way to enjoy "Dear Esther", but to become a co-author of this virtual world. This is a dead piece of rock overgrown with crashed ships. There's nothing real interesting out there at the isolated and deserted island if your own mind is isolated and deserted. You won't be satisfied if you just sit down and listen to the voice mutterings and music scapes. It's not an audio book. It's not a pack of visuals and level design tutorials. You can't be entertained if there's nothing entertaining in your own imagination. "Dear Esther" is surely an experiment. But is not an experiment what art is supposed to be? "Dear Esther" is unfinished. But is there any piece of art that is truly finished? Jorge Luis Borges, the most famous Spanish author of short-stories, was asked once in a interview: "How do you finish your stories?" And Jorge answered: "There's no single story that I truly finished. There's always something to polish and as a result the process of writing is infinite. But then my editor just comes and picks up the</p> | | | |
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| | manuscript". | | | |
| 10.0 | <p>How to defeat Donneley? I keep dying at this part. Every time I try to shoot him with my aerial gun he confronts me with traumatic memories of a car crash, causing my femur to break. I'm all out of sedatives, so it is very hard to keep my lucidity level up during the bossfight. I know I can get a buff by carving white lines into the cliffs, but then I'll first have to grind seagulls until the fabric of life unravels.</p> <p>Any tips?</p> |  | | |
| 11.0 | <p>How do i shoot? I got the pistol, but it keeps saying the gun is jammed. how do i fix this?</p> |  | | |
| 12.0 | <p>Was this based on a real island in Scotland and if so which one? I'm curious they say in the Hebrides but I can't find any other information that goes a little deeper into what they based it of and if they actually visited etc.</p> | | | |
| 13.0 | <p>A slightly different theory (spoiler alert) Quote: "I will look to my left and see Esther Donnelly, flying beside me. I will look to my right and see Paul Jakobson, flying beside me. "</p> <p>My simplistic theory is that this flight is a description of the seconds immediately following the car crash, with the narrator (being Donnelly), his daughter Esther and their car flying off the cliff at the same time as Paul Jakobson and his car. As a result of the accident the narrator is left in a coma, with the entire island walk happening in his mind. Esther and Paul may or may not be dead. Some referenced characters (e.g. the 18th century Jakobson the herder & Donnelly the writer) are merely a figment of his imagination, transforming himself and Jakobson (presumably an acquaintance) into different characters from a different time.</p> <p>Does this make any sense?</p> |  | | |
| 14.11 | <p>The fun of this game is not built within the world of the game itself- It exists in the mind of the viewer. During my couple-month-long obsession, I was researching the game in addition to playing it all the time. The developers did not even have a "true story" designated- They just designed modular pieces that can fit together in any pattern. The result is that a story forms, simply due to the human mind's natural desire to find patterns. And so, in throwing all of these pieces at the viewer, the game is in seeing how you'll put it all together. A kind of mental puzzle, if you will.</p> |  | | |
| 15.4 | <p>For what it's worth, I found it surprisingly compelling once I started properly listening and looking and not rushing through. It's an experience more than a game.</p> |  | | |
| 15.5 | <p>I notice even myself skipping over dialogue and cutscenes recently so a game that focuses and actually appreciate the story might be a very welcome breath of fresh air.</p> |  | | |
| 16.0 | <p>this game moved my nerves and I couldn't help me with tears.</p> | | | |
| 16.1 | <p>it seems almost everything has some hidden meaning or reason why it's there in the game.</p> |  | | |
| 17.0 | <p>Anyone ****ed off by the ending? [Spoilers] Title.</p> <p>That spell that Donneley used to turn you into a seagull at the end of the game before he died really threw me off. And then you got backstabbed by Jakobsen, who steals your aerial gun and kills you with it.</p> <p>Seriously, devs???</p> |  | | |






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| | The rest of the game was fun though. I especially enjoyed how you could bypass grinding the seagulls by finding the underground boat cache and using the white paint for the cliff lines. | | | |
| 18.5 | I remember when i finished this piece for a first time i just had to go and play some "stupid" FPS to relax and shake that dark story off me ;). |  | | |
| 18.7 | Sad to hear you can't immerse yourself. I guess books don't come easy for you do they? |  | | |
| 19.3 | <p>Scary? Not really. A little unnerving, yes - in some places more than others. The island's isolation and the feeling of total abandonment / loneliness create a rather peculiar atmosphere in combination with other elements, such as the howling wind, the luminescent scrawlings, (etc.). There are more aspects which add to this feeling, which elements I would describe more in terms of wonder and melancholy, but I don't want to spoil anything.</p> <p>One of the more creepy aspects, though, were the "shadow figures" you can see along the paths from time to time, who are apparently looking over you. It's a peculiar sensation that went along nicely with the atmosphere and the unreliable narration - I derived a strange sense of satisfaction from it (with regards to the immersion in the story).</p> |   | | |
| 19.5 | I was scared of anything near water - I get pretty scared by the thought of being sucked under water into the ocean - who knows what's down there! But no jumps. I was glad, actually. Didn't want it to be a game where I was expecting to be jump-scared. | | | |
| 20.0 | <p>Confused? That's by Design</p> <p>I had posted this a couple years ago and thought I'd share again for those who don't get this game:</p> <p>If you play the game, get to the end, and look back and say, "What just happened?", that was intended. (Spoiler Alert)</p> <p>This game is about a man searching his past, retracing his steps over and over and over again, trying to find the little detail he was missing to piece together the meaning for that most tragic of events that occurred in his life. He is trying to find the reason for losing his dear Esther, trying to find purpose lest he drown himself in grief. His inner war for dulling the pain and yet seeing the facts clearly are themes echoed in almost every monologue, such as swallowing the pills yet wishing to see soberly. This duality drives him as he trudges through his subconscious time and again in hopes he might tell himself the answer he hides from himself. The throbs of his legs and his kidney stones are symbols of the memory of the awful event that continually plagues his mind like a throbbing pain, that tragedy on the road he willingly endures time and again as he looks for tiny details such as counting the gulls or the miles or micrometers and maybe finding a connection so as to bring purpose to his tragedy. Never truly coming to a final conclusion, he always arrives at the same end which drives him back to the memory for answers.</p> <p>And that, my friends, is the purpose of your confusion. You saw all the answers in front of you but still could not understand. This will drive you to go back to the beginning whether on your computer screen or in your mind, walk through the events again as to maybe gather another fragment of the mystery you are trying to piece together. And as you subject yourself to the story again, you find yourself becoming the man you have been observing this whole time, revisiting over and over again to find your answers to put purpose to what you have observed. In fact your</p> |   | | |




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| | <p>observations will then truly turn into experience, and when that happens, the creators of Dear Esther have achieved their goal, making a game that is not a game, but a true and real experience.</p> <p>Well played, ChineseRoom, well played.</p> | | | |
| 20.1 | <p>Those are the most beautiful words that i have read since i'm here, glad you loved it too.</p> <p>It somehow changed my life and the way i'm looking at it, a great goal indeed.</p> |  | | |
| 20.2 | <p>But the truth is the game is interpreted differently to each individual who plays it. There is no right or wrong story. The Chinese Room have never even confirmed if the player is the narrator or not.</p> <p>The real point of the game is whatever it means to you. Weather it's a broken man walking around a real Scottish Island, weather it's Esther dreaming of the Island in a coma, weather the narrator died in the accident too. There is no canon.</p> |  | | |
| 21.0 | <p>The story</p> <p>I just finished playing Dear Esther and after reading all the "theories" on the internet i noticed something very interesting fact. I found out what the hell is going on here, its very simple infact. Ok, so it all snaped to me at the last chapter, lets start of with the ghosts. You may have found a few ghosts walking around or standingnext to a candle. Well, they are just like you, and just like the narrator. Ok, so the ghosts are also people who are in a coma or about to die. They have limited time before their bodies finnaly die and before they fade out of the island, that is where the candles and markings come in. The ghosts like to mark where they last were before they died, i mean look. In the last chapter most of the candles are all around the beach, if you stand on the candles, you will be able to see a beautiful veiw, i also found in a cave a bunch of candles stacked together in a circle. Meaning the ghosts were chatting before they faded. I also found a candle in a corner of a room, alone. Meaning the guy died right there. But what about the candles that dont seem to be in a fitting place, like that cave? As said, they may have limited time before they die, and everyone wants to go to one place. The beacon! Everyone was on their way to there, some candles were planted on the stairs to the beacon, some where stuck in the caves. And the ghosts probably paitned those marks so they could either know where they were and weren't, or they just wanted to decorate their final position? Either way that would explain the markings, candles, and ghosts. So what is else remaining? Esther, the protagonist. If you think the man talking is you then you are wrong, he is already dead. When nearing the water in the final chapter you can hear him say that he "MADE boats and just let them be on the sea" So the Narrator left some markings on his own. The ghost at the end staring into the moonlight could be him, and that would mean that they died in the same accident? Esther was hooked to machines in the hospital as you were able to hear in some places, even a file inside the game is called "Monitor0001". And so where were you heading in the game? To the same place everyone else wanted to go before they die, the top of the beacon! You might see some candles on your way there, meaning the ghosts were going for the beacon, but sadly had no more time. But you, Esther, had enough time to climb to the top. The only thing i cannot explain is the ending where you fly away like a crow. If you look closely, you will find shadows of a bird on the ground, those are your shadows. I am willing to listen to your own theories and alll that, thats why i made this. I cant wait to hear what you found out.</p> |  | | |
| 21.1 | <p>It's one theory, one of the many.</p> <p>It's not really clear who the narrator his, he could be Donnelly or Jackobson.</p> |  | | |

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| | <p>I think both are the same person, Donnelly somehow caged himself into this island when Esther died in the car accident, he drown in alchool to release his guilt but he failed, (Jackobson) he broke his leg into the cave and he got blood disease that lead to death. I think he's already dead while we are playing and he is rearsing his last moments, his last thoughts and pains along the way for the beacon. If you fall in the water or down a cliff you simply "come back" to a previous spot, you can't die if you're already. Maybe only him can see all the paintend signs, or he drew to remind him what happened, you can see synapses and electronic schemes (maybe the car braking system?) And the final flight it could be a metaphor of his grudge being release, what you see is a seagull, a simbol of freedom (a man on an island is caged, he can't escape, but a seagull can fly everywhere, that make him free) or even that last flight it's not really an end (the endless black screen) you're not free and you're forever stuck in this heaven/hell bind to revive everyday your last moment, but you have no reminiscences of your last day, so everitime it's different because a different aspect of your mind is involved, sometimes it's the Jackobson burden of alchool, sometimes it's the grief of Donnelly for his lost, sometimes he realize that wasn't alchool fault if they crashed, sometimes he blame the other driver. You can't left this place, you're a wandering soul looking for mercy but you simply can't escape your faults, and so you're forced to live them endlessly.</p> <p>Considering all the words spent around it, we can claim that (good or bad) it's the most debacted game ever, a great point for it. There are so little game that can achieve such goal.</p> | | | |
| 21.8 | <p>MOST!! unusual game!! Would not really call it a game, but rather a walk-through narrative. Obviously severely depressed personage. As a chemist, and a dabbler in electronics, I tried to figure out some of the structures on the rocks, but other than ethyl alcohol, and dopamine, I couldn't identify most of the chemicals. There were several transformer symbols and transistor symbols in the electronics.</p> <p>Writings were bible quotes and such. I particularly liked the "Damascus is fallen" one.</p> <p>I went through the seagull ending, but for some reason, after sailing out to sea over the fleet of paper boats, it faded to black but stayed there and didn't finish up untill i hit the escape key and manually quit</p> |  | | |
| 21.10 | <p>I thought the narrator was the one who painted all the symbols with the paint scavenged from the ship. He committed suicide over grief but it sounds like he was dying anyway. I'm not sure, I just finished this game, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it.</p> <p>I'm positive the schematics are of the abs braking system of the car, but they have some symbolic meaning relating to the life of the narrator. Where you find drawings of neurons, you find schematics as well...as though both are related. The hebrew symbols if used numerically add up to 21.</p> |  | | |
| 22.4 | <p>It have a beautiful score and an imersive enviroment, if you like to lose in it. It's a game that take it's own time, not to rush into it, just enjoy the slow pace, the surroundings, the music and the little bit of story given.</p> |  | | |
| 22.13 | <p>it was extremely emotionally draining for me</p> |  | | |
| 22.19 | <p>Technically its not a game, just an interactive movie. I dont argue the fact that its "art". And while games can be art, I dont consider this a game, because by definition it has no gameplay.</p> |  | | |

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| | <p>Walking \neq to gameplay. Gameplay usually means something something to do, but walking doesn't count. A game shouldn't try to carry itself on how pretty it is alone, everything needs substance. The person above me says that gameplay is working your fingers. This isn't true, not all games are button mashing, there are games where you hardly have to click or button mash. And technically this "game" does work your fingers, you still have to press the w a s d keys to move ;).</p> <p>Someone gifted me this "game", and yes I did finish it. While I admit there are beautiful places in this game(honestly about two places, everything else reminded me of a barren warzone out of some new FPS title). I honestly would have enjoyed this more if I knew up front that it wasn't a game, and was an interactive story/movie/book. Yes this game did have atmosphere, but so do so many other games i've played.</p> <p>In the 90s, when I was a child I had these little disks with stories on them, usually like the mouse and the lion ect. They were the 90s equivalent of this game, an interactive story book. Before those disks I had books, some of which came with lil cassette tapes, that voiced over the story while you read. I consider Dear Esther to be the same as these, except the adult equivalent.</p> <p>Perhaps this should be rebranded as a virtual immersive story or something like that. Rather than a "game", honestly if the character was programmed to walk itself, I honestly would consider this program as a glorified screensaver.</p> <p>Yes, some people enjoy it. Some people don't. Some people feel cheated by buying something that they believed to be something else. Lets not keep calling Dear Esther what its not :3</p> <p>Although this "game" might be nice in a VR type setting, perhaps even connected to a treadmill or such.</p> <p>I remember there was once a deer "game" made, where you would walk around as a really weird looking deer creature online, but it didn't really have gameplay, nor talking ect, it advertised itself as an "interactive screensaver" It was artsy, it was indie, and it was made years ago.</p> <p>TL;DR Dear Esther isn't a game, quit getting butthurt over it. Just because its not a game doesn't mean it should be bashed. If you felt misled I can understand. Some people are addicted to the "game".</p> | | | |
| 23.5 | <p>Well, there are essentially two ways to look at the story. Either;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the narrator is describing real events, at least as he sees them, or; 2) the narrator is experiencing some sort of hallucination / coma dream / metaphysical fantasy. <p>I know the above is true, because the game's authors are on record as saying so.</p> <p>If (1) is the case, and the narrator is essentially telling the truth, then it's a story of a man suffering a mental breakdown following the death of his wife at the hands of a drunk driver. His condition deteriorates over time, as he looks for reasons or connections to explain the event. He cannot accept that something so disastrous and</p> | | | |

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| | <p>terrible could happen for no reason. He seeks explanations in chemistry, biology, religion, history, electronics, and mathematics, but finds no answer. Beside his already flawed mental functions, he's also suffering potentially fatal blood poisoning from an infected leg wound, and is attempting to keep going by taking huge quantities of diazepam and paracetamol, all of which would further damage his mental functions. By the time we get to the last half of the story, he is completely delirious, and all the facts are jumbled in his mind. He finally decides that the only release lies in suicide. And maybe, for him, it is.</p> <p>If scenario (2) is the case, and the whole thing is a hallucination / dream / fantasy or whatever, if the island and the narrator's history are not real, then it's pretty pointless speculating on what the meaning may be. None of it's real, none of it's reliable, and it doesn't tell a coherent story. You can interpret it any way you like.</p> <p>In terms of meaning, I can tell you (again, because the authors have said so) that not everything in the game does have a meaning. Some things are put there purely to confuse. The constant references to the number 21, for instance, are meaningless. The story of the saint in a boat without a bottom is meaningless. The diagram of the golden mean in the sand is meaningless.</p> <p>It's a hugely complex piece of narrative, and I'm still enjoying it.</p> <p>T: -)</p> | | | |
| 23.6 | I feel like ive been to the island |  | | |
| 24.0 | if you let yourself be taken in by the environment its trying to create for you...you will have a mesmerising experience. |  | | |
| 25.0 | <p>Some Thoughts - the ship and the coins Some thoughts.</p> <p>The Ship</p> <p>The wrecked ship at The Buoy is a stern-trawler. Strictly a fishing boat. That's what the big gantry at the stern is for. Yet on its deck, on the beach, and in the sea nearby, are eight large freight containers. A trawler is physically incapable of carrying freight containers on deck. Even if it were adapted with the proper twist-locks etc., the weight distribution would be all wrong. A trawler is designed to carry its cargo weight low down in the holds. If you stacked the weight up on deck, you'd move the centre of gravity too high, and the boat would capsize. Either the game designers don't know much about boats, or this is a deliberate inconsistency.</p> <p>The Coins</p> <p>There is a section in The Caves where you come upon a pool surrounded by coins. If you look up, you'll see that there are also coins on the ledges above you. If you dive into the pool, there are many more coins (perhaps hundreds – I haven't tried to count them) at the bottom. It appears that part of the designer's intent was to portray this as a wishing well.</p> <p>Despite there being many coins, there are only four coin images used.</p> <p>The first is a Dutch silver 3 Guilder piece, dated 1820.</p> |  | | |

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| | <p>The second is an Austrian silver Marie Therese Thaler. The date is not shown, but Marie Therese reigned between 1740 and 1780, so it must have been produced in that period.</p> <p>The third is a silver coin showing the head of Alexander the Great, dating to somewhere between 323 and 280 BC.</p> <p>The fourth is a United States silver Dollar, dated 1803.</p> <p>This particular wishing well seems to have been in use for more than a thousand years, by people from three different continents, Europe, Asia, and North America.</p> <p>In one of the voice-overs for this section, the narrator says "I will hold the hand you offered me, from the summit down to this well..."</p> <p>T : -)</p> | | | |
| 26.0 | <p>To the readers: Are there any books similar to Dear Esther you could recommend? Perhaps one with a similar writing style. I can't help but be drawn to the very confusing way in which Dear Esther is written. It adds to the story really nicely!</p> |  | | |
| 27.0 | <p>Unusual experience, well worth it to someone of Intelligence People without a brain cell will complain it's not game. Indeed there's nothing to win or lose. I would consider it more an interactive narrative, a free viewing world with limitations, but full of the unknown and wondrous sights. The visuals alone will be worth the adventure. In the end you will feel a heavy weight, and a bit richer for the experience you never get in games. Grief, loss, heart ache. You can count on one hand the games that make you feel genuine sadness and loss. I am happy to have experienced the journey to damascus.</p> |   | | |
| 28.0 | <p>(SPOILER) Another Dear Esther speculation, please tell me what you think about it I thought about another possible theory about the ending of Dear Esther: the narrator and the player are actually the same person, and the narrator is actually Esther's husband. Esther is dead in a car accident, and looking to those ecography, it is possible she was pregnant. But in one of the two possible ending scripts, the narrator says that "Esther is like a nest [...] in whice eggs unbroken form like fossils". The broken eggs appear frequently in the game, and many people thought it's because Esther lost both her life and the one of the unborn baby during the car accident. But the eggs, the narrator says, are unbroken, and they "form like fossils": does it means that Esther's son was already dead at the time of the accident? Probably Esther and her husband knew it, from the moment he suggests he had gone to pick up Esther from somewhere, and when he saw her she had her last drink in her hand; maybe she was indeed drunken for the news, and the narrator too. Esther's husband sometimes speaks of the drunken driver as he was talking about himself, and near the end he says HE was not drunken. Is this a way he tries non to feel guilty? If Esther was his wife, why did he had to STEAL her ashes, as he often says? Maybe he wasn't welcome there, because he was drunk at the time of the accident. Also, I think is possible that</p> |   | | |

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| | <p>Paul actually had a heart attack, maybe caused by a gull that was flying low. The narrator tries, for years, to blame Paul or a break failure for the accident, when he and Esther caused it due to the shock for the death of the baby while she was already pregnant; when she checked this, she called her husband to pick her up from the hospital, and returning they had their car to crash with Paul's one. This is why the narrator identifies with Paul, because he was convinced for so much time he was to blame for that deadly mistake; Paul and the narrator are like Jakobson, a poor shepard who wanters a good life, and suddenly he died for a fall in the darkness (the accident); Esther is like Donnely, both with a great deal on their own (Donnely was writing a History of Hebrides, she was carrying a baby in her belly), but then all their expectations vanished (Donnely couldn't find the hermit's bones, she lost her baby) and both started self-destructing (Donnely became a drug addicted and she was drunk like her husband, so she couldn't help him avoding the accident).</p> <p>That's it, this is my own interpretation of Dear Esther. Tell me what do you think about it. English is not my native language, so if there's anything that is not clear, ask me and I'll try to explain you better.</p> | | | |
| 29.5 | <p>I think the game is about sorrow and forgiveness. I interpret the island as some kind of limbo created by the main character because of the guilt he felt for Esther's death. For me the ending represents superation: the character accepts death and frees himself from his self-imposed exile. It really didn't look like suicide to me.</p> |  | | |
| 30.0 | <p>Hidden Science What do you guys think, what does all the "science stuff" (for lack of a better word) mean in this game? I found the chemical structure for ethanol, and the fibbonacci spiral in the sand, i think there were also some circuitboard mechanisms or so. What do they mean?</p> |  | | |
| 30.1 | <p>I understood this fibonacci spiral as this game could be played numerous times always with different experience. But for other two (chemicals and circuits) i have no idea. Paul is said to be working in pharmaceutical company... There're few ghosts in the game that could be seen though. They're greater mystery to me than the chemicals or circuits...</p> |  | | |

Appendix 2: Firewatch Steam Comments

| Post Number | Comment | T/I | H | P/C |
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| 1.1 | Does it feel like 1980s to you? I enjoyed the game, but the characters did not feel like they belonged in 1989 to me--I was 19 in 1989. It sounded like folks from 2018 trying to recreate the time period, getting the superficial stuff right, but not the dialogue. | | | |
| 1.1.5 | Doesn't feel like the 80's at all ... Just because they put a typewriter, some walkie-talkies and a walkman into it. I mean the dialogue is all swearing (that is also not 80's). Same for the references to alcohol, drugs and whatever. It still happens today. For the rest I find it an intresting game so far, but they kinda missed the ball on the time period imo. | | | |
| 1.1.8 | Originally posted by PodjeGamen: I acutally enjoyed the time period it was set in. They don't have access to internet or mobile phones, which makes the superstition something valuable. Didn't really mind the use of language either. It's not like actors in movies from the 80s talk very different to the way we talk now xD I did chuckle at the idea that people "didn't curse so much in the 1980's." I'm gonna guess he never watched Full Metal Jacket (c. 1987), a movie about the late 60's and 70's, with some of the best potty mouth I've ever heard. Then to think they weren't using and talking about drugs and alcohol in the 80's? The 30's made alcohol cool and the 60's made drugs cool. It's kind of like that person was born in 1981 and only has a child-like perspective on the era. Though, I was born in 88, and I don't have such rose colored glasses. The game only seems set in that period to avoid cell phones and internet while having effective handheld radio/walkie talkies. It's using that time period for that reason only, from what I can tell. Otherwise you can imagine this is any year you want. It won't hurt the story and dialogue any to imagine it's 2008 and there are no cell towers in that wilderness. | | | |
| 1.2 | I'm so dissapointed with the ending. Really really unsatisfying ending. So much oppotunity for twitsts and turns. Chances to answer questions, but the ending was bland. Boring. And left me with a feeling that I would have rather not even taken the ride because the conclusion just answered zero questions. So dissapointed. | | | |
| 1.2.2 | Originally posted by Diyavol: Like life... Not like life, In life I would get to see what happened with his wife, I would get to make choices and decisions that are not simply binary or just 3 possible | | | |

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| | replies. What is the point of a story driven game when the ending of that story leaves you with no new information other than what you had at the beginning? The things it did answer were not shocking at all and boring to boot. Waste of time and money. | | | |
| 1.2.4 | Originally posted by Unhinged: I think it was more about the Journey, not the destination Pretty much. Henry starts the game in a very bad place, alienated and disconnected, mostly due to his own poor choices. Firewatch is a game about reconnecting and recovering from your bad choices (which another character is incapable of doing). It's not a problem that can be solved with a single climactic battle; it's an internal process, and the developers trust us to be smart enough to follow it. "What happens next" is less important than knowing there will be a next. | | | |
| 1.2.5 | Just finished the game today. I sort of love the ending the more I think about it. As some of these folks have already said--it's anticlimactic on purpose. It's saying something about the revelations we expect to find in life, and the meanings we construct when they don't come. It's beautiful. | | | |
| 1.2.6 | Originally posted by madsquid: it's anticlimactic on purpose. [,,] It's beautiful. Yeah, thought so too. I liked the elegance of having a minimalist plot, or at least fewer real events, when compared to what the characters were thinking and discussing. | | | |
| 1.2.7 | Originally posted by waldwuffel: Originally posted by madsquid: it's anticlimactic on purpose. [,,] It's beautiful. Yeah, thought so too. I liked the elegance of having a minimalist plot, or at least fewer real events, when compared to what the characters were thinking and discussing. I don't disrespect anyones opinion here. I guess I just loved the characters so much I really wanted a proper conclusion. I fell in love with the story and I feel as though I was jipped by not really learning anything about how their relationships all end. | | | |
| 1.2.8 | It doesn't matter what happens with his wife. Henry explains that her family took her away and won't let him see her. The whole reason he left to join the Forest Service was to learn how to live without her, but the story wasn't about him. It was about solving the mystery of Brian's disappearance. Henry and Delilah's story's are catalysts to that end, but their story doesn't end here anyway. Their lives go on. | | | |
| 1.2.9 | Originally posted by Buck: It doesn't matter what happens with his wife. Henry explains that her family took her away and won't let him see her. The whole reason he left to join the Forest Service was to learn how to live without her, but the story wasn't about him. It was about solving the mystery of Brian's disappearance. Henry and Delilah's story's are catalysts to that end, but their story doesn't end here anyway. Their lives go on. true.But this all just sounds like defending a story where truly nothing happened. No twists. No conclusions. Just questions set up to be left unanswered. | | | |
| 1.2.11 | Originally posted by Diyavol: Originally posted by Bender_(I'm Back Baby): | | | |

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| | <p>Not like life, In life I would get to see what happened with his wife, I would get to make choices and descisions that are not simply binary or just 3 possible replies. What is the point of a story driven game when the ending of that story leaves you with no new information other than what you had at the beginning. The things it did answer were not shocking at all and boring to boot. Waste of time and money.</p> <p>Calm down my friend. Like I said it's "Like life...". In real life you will never find answers to some questions, this game is like this.</p> <p>That defense is just an excuse to sound like you have some profound appreciation for the unknown, That you have some deep apreciation for a question with no answer. when in reality it's lazy and boring storytelling, and an oppertunity for fake intellectuals to perform a mental circle jerk about how great something is in it's unfinished form. Screw off.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.13 | <p>Originally posted by Bender_(I'm Back Baby): true.But this all just sounds like defending a story where truly nothing happened.</p> <p>Sure, If you consider all of the character's lives to be "nothing"</p> <p>No twists.</p> <p>you mean like loarning the source of all the weird goings on?</p> <p>No conclusions. The whole story gets fully concluded.</p> <p>Just questions set up to be left unanswered.</p> <p>What questions were unanswered? you learn exactly what was going on and why. Beyond that, life goes on.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.14 | <p>Originally posted by Buck: Originally posted by Bender_(I'm Back Baby): true.But this all just sounds like defending a story where truly nothing happened.</p> <p>Sure, If you consider all of the character's lives to be "nothing"</p> <p>No twists.</p> <p>you mean like loarning the source of all the weird goings on?</p> <p>No conclusions. The whole story gets fully concluded.</p> <p>Just questions set up to be left unanswered.</p> <p>What questions were unanswered? you learn exactly what was going on and why. Beyond that, life goes on. No questions posed in the start of the story were answered. We know nothing more as the player then we knew at the start before we took the job.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.15 | <p>I love this game so much, but the ending did feel rather 'blaahh', and it left me with this bittersweet feeling, and i'm really not sure how I would've made it any better.</p> | | | |

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| | <p>I did love how they teased some paranormal/light horror stuff in there, but then the games like ..actually nah, you're just paranoid, its all in your head, everythings perfectly normal and explainable here lol It didn't make me angry, but left me with this feeling of "...huh, alright then.."</p> <p>For me, the amazing voice acting and great art style more than made up for the dry fart of an ending. I really felt like I 'knew' these people personally by the end of the game, and i'll be comparing the voice acting in every other game I ever play to this one.</p> <p>Overall, it was short but sweet, even though things don't turn out quite like you imagine or hope they would.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.16 | <p>I didn't expect the ending to be amazing, but I did expect at least a little more direction with it. In the end you don't really get to influence any result based on the interactions you have made with world. To me it appeared only the decisions made in Henry's backstory had a pull in your later conversations, but not in any other form. The conclusion with the teens was glazed over, my Turt Reynolds only got to shine in one moment, and my Coon encounter wasn't even reflected on much. TLDR: Good Game - Fair Story.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.17 | <p>Originally posted by Bender_(I'm Back Baby): Really really unsatisfying ending. So much oppertunity for twistts and turns. Chances to answer questions, but the ending was bland. Boring. And left me with a feeling that I would have rather not even taken the ride because the conclusion just answered zero questions. So dissapointed.</p> <p>If the story line didnt answer your questions... you did not explore enough.</p> <p>Firewatch is a true single player exploration game.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.18 | <p>Same I kept hoping and hoping towards the end that we would meet Delilah and fly out in the helicopter together. So let down that she flies away first on her own. Just after all the build up that's what I wanted. I am going to do the free roam just to see what that's like.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.20 | <p>such a goddamn terrible ending. It's a complete cop out, don't care what you say. The elk and the tag and the university being written on the pamphlet being argued as "red herrings" making it all mean there was never anything to be worried about is ABSOLUTELY NO EXCUSE for how god awful it is. You know it's a bad story when you have to plop all these "clues" in to make it stick within the player. Just make a good ♥♥♥♥ing story. God damn it.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.21 | <p>Originally posted by Wario: Really really unsatisfying ending. So much oppertunity for twistts and turns. Chances to answer questions, but the ending was bland. Boring. And left me with a feeling that I would have rather not even taken the ride because the conclusion just answered zero questions. So dissapointed. Yeah....the ending was REALLY BAD. Completely destroyed whole experience.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.22 | <p>Originally posted by Wario: Originally posted by Diyavol: Calm down my friend. Like I said it's "Like life...". In real life you will never find answers to some questions, this game is like this. That defense is just an excuse to sound like you have some profound appreciation for the unknown, That you have some deep apreciation for a question with no answer. when in reality it's lazy and boring storytelling, and an oppertunity for fake intellectuals to perform a mental circle jerk about how great</p> | | | |

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| | <p>something is in it's unfinished form. Screw off.</p> <p>Joseph Heller - 'Something Happened'</p> <p>Enjoy.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.27 | <p>Here are some questions that I don't think were DEFINITELY answered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Who/what ripped up the girls tent and why? The kids dad, presumably, but the why was never explained. 2) Why did the girls break into the lookout station? To steal his sheets? Really? 3) Two girls go out to the wilderness to drink beer, shoot of fireworks, and leave beercans and underwear spread everywhere? I don't want to sound sexist, but this seems a bit farfetched. I was hoping for a bit of explanation here. 4) Why was the expensive equipment camp set up and fenced off? What research was going on there? (I understand that the kids dad sneakily used the equipment to listen in.) Also, explain why anyone would "hide" radio towers in a valley where the fire lookouts can't see them. Kinda defeats the purpose of receiving radio signals. 5) Who, if anyone, started each of the two fires, and why? We kinda got the impression that the kids dad started the fire at the research site to cover his tracks, but did he confess this? <p>I have more, but you get the idea.</p> <p>I did, however, LOVE the game. Best voice acting I've ever heard in a game! It really gave the characters depth and identy. The story just seemed a bit like the "Lost" TV series in that it presented tons of mysteries and only answered a few.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.28 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Ned cut the powerlines and framed the girls for it, so he had stolen their underwear and some beer to frame them. Not entirely sure why he ripped up their tent, maybe to scare them off, and try to scare henry. Alternatively, it really just could have been a bear. 2) Ned stole Henry's sheets. He planted it at the girl's camp to throw Henry off, so that he wouldn't be found. 3) People do weird things when drunk. Especially the kind of people that would go to a place as isolated as the Thorofare. 4) It was a biologist research camp. They were monitoring wildlife, in particular elk (later in the game you can find a dead elk wearing a tracking collar). The location was likely just not visible to lookouts by chance. It was near a meadow, so perhaps the radio signal was better there. 5) The first fire was just a random bushfire. After all, it is your job to watch for fires, no one necessarily started it. The second was definitely started by Ned. Delilah talked about burning the site down, and later on you get a tape recorded from nearby that 'frames' henry by implying that he agreed with the plan. This is yet another plan to try and scare Henry off, so that he doesn't find Ned and Brian's body | | | |
| 1.2.30 | <p>Originally posted by Ameyazing:</p> <p>The concept of the game was good.. but i felt the ending was not so good, it was like an open end, unless if Devs plan to bring out something unexpectd again.</p> | | | |

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| | Maybe the next game we play Delilah and the tables are turned on her. | | | |
| 1.2.34 | Originally posted by L1qu1dator: Originally posted by The Borax Kid: Bingo! Well then the game sucks. Isn't even worth 5\$. A fine example why the reviews are pointless. the game was fun to play, but only because I wanted to get that satisfying conclusion. When it didn't have it, it made the whole run feel worthless. | | | |
| 1.2.36 | Originally posted by Sofie: Yea I agree. although Im more disappointed with the fact that he didnt get to meet Delilah EXACTLY! I was rooting for them all along. I wanted him to at least meet her. | | | |
| 1.2.38 | At first, I was let down by the resolution, too, but then it made me think about how we sometimes make things more exciting than they really are because we don't want to have to think about our own reality. It's easy to get sucked in when you think there's a mystery or conspiracy and your brain is spinning with all these different what ifs before you have the proper facts, but the game made me realize that my imagination was going down that road only because I *wanted* there to be some sort of shocking discovery. But as others have said, life isn't usually like that and we sometimes find ourselves fabricating some sense of meaning or excitement to dull the pain of our real life circumstances. And in the end, we're still back to dealing with reality, anyway, despite how much we've tried to escape it or embellish it. That's what I got out of it, at least. | | | |
| 1.2.41 | Spoiler alert: good stories don't have to have satisfying endings in order to be good. Often the lack of a pretty bow tying up everything in the end *is* a significant part of what makes the story good to begin with. Not all story-heavy games have to end with giving you everything you want. | | | |
| 1.2.42 | Originally posted by Boop the Snoot: Spoiler alert: good stories don't have to have satisfying endings in order to be good. Often the lack of a pretty bow tying up everything in the end *is* a significant part of what makes the story good to begin with. Not all story-heavy games have to end with giving you everything you want. No one asked for "what we want" but some kind of conclusion would be nice. I'm really sick of fanboys defending bad writing because they pretend they're more deep than other people. Screw off | | | |
| 1.2.46 | I just beat the game and while I was hoping to meet Delilah and see a happy ending, it does actually make sense. If you read through Ned's notes he took while spying on you both, it says Delilah is still seeing her boyfriend. You asked her about it during the game and she denies it. It seems like she likes to flirt and pull at other guys heart strings. So if she is still with her boyfriend it would make sense that she leaves and doesn't want to meet you. The game was great. It sucked me right in. The characters and interactions between them were done perfectly. While a happy ending might have been nice, this is just showing one part of Henry's life. What he does to deal with what happened to his wife and how he is moving forward in his life. You can tell Delilah you are going to visit your wife but in the end you probably won't because her family are looking after her in another country. Henry did get attached to Delilah, had some feelings for her and that will help him move on. Sure it isn't the happy ending everyone wants, but it's a more realistic version of what would happen. Delilah has a boyfriend and knows Henry isn't over his wife so wouldn't make sense for them to run into each others arms and live | | | |

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| | <p>happily ever after.</p> <p>I held off playing Firewatch for so long. I'm glad I got around to playing it. Great game!</p> | | | |
| 1.2.50 | <p>Originally posted by ObsessedEddie: the game feels lifeless outside of the dialogue. 0 wildlife lol</p> <p>Turtle Deer Racoon</p> <p>I don't call this zero wildlife! lol!</p> <p>You want better forest and wildlife? Go play The Hunter Call of the wild then!</p> <p>Firewatch isn't a forest simulator! We all knew except for you! ;) You're right it's not a forest sim. It's a story game with a boring ending. We all knew except for you ! ;)</p> | | | |
| 1.2.51 | <p>Hehehe!</p> <p>Actually I did enjoy the game... and the ending too. I pretty much think like Rattlesnake8 said. Sure, I think we all hoped for a different ending, it's something we all felt for somehow.</p> <p>But I find Firewatch was like reading a book: as you reach the end, you sometime really wished things would go a certain way as you read it, but there nothing you could do about it. An hopeless feeling that you had to go through, regardless.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.52 | <p>that game has horrible animal ai, and no , the game isnt just a story sim when it has you waling around climbing mountains and doing mundane tasks</p> | | | |
| 1.2.53 | <p>the game tries to immerse the player in the environment and i feel like it only hits that mark for people who never spend time outside</p> | | | |
| 1.2.54 | <p>Walking sim= walking This game= walking, running, climbing, calling, dialogue choices, and open world exploration (with extremely linear pathing)</p> | | | |
| 1.2.61 | <p>I don't think the ending was poorly crafted and I do also think it was pretty much intended for a player to feel conflicted about it. I was also pretty disappointed, pretty much just because Henry and Delilah never got to meet, which is weird considering they spent months talking to each other and both stations are a hike away.</p> <p>But I still like it, since you would EXPECT something like aliens or a government conspiracy, but it doesn't do that.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.62 | <p>Henry and Delilah never got to meet, which is weird considering they spent months talking to each other and both stations are a hike away.</p> <p>One plot hole of many. Delilah casually hikes over to two forks to leave Henry a new walkie talkie (without dropping in on him) but we're meant to believe they never meet and hang out? Nope, that's implausible. Yet neither of the characters ever mentions that they've hung out. To be fair, they never explicitly mention they haven't either.</p> | | | |
| 1.2.63 | <p>It's not so much the quality of the writing, more that the story arc is interrupted while it's still in the exposition phase. It feels like they ran out of money to be completely honest.</p> | | | |

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| | That video was quite thoughtful but as a player I don't think I experienced even a tiny fraction of what he mentioned. It's like listening to someone with social anxiety finding hidden meanings in all of their inconsequential daily interactions. | | | |
| 1.2.65 | Originally posted by Gatsu: Really really unsatisfying ending. So much opportunity for twistts and turns. Chances to answer questions, but the ending was bland. Boring. And left me with a feeling that I would have rather not even taken the ride because the conclusion just answered zero questions. So dissapointed. Woman likes screwing multiple guys at once and seduces a married man just for fun then leaves him to die in a forest fire. The end. | | | |
| 2.1 | Dumb story moment (spoilers, obviously) After discovering Wapiti Station has been gated off, your next objective is to go to the camp nearby the controlled burn to get some assistance. When you attempt to get into the camp, the bridge is out, and yet Henry and Delilah both agree that they need to find another way in. Am I the only one who thinks this moment is extremely...stupid? If you have a team of professionals setting up camp near a job site, there wouldn't be a broken bridge. They would have either repaired it or set up camp somewhere else. Common sense tells you that broken bridge = this ain't it chief. And sure enough, when you get in, nobody's there. Am I missing something or is this as contrived as I think it is? IMO it would have made more sense if the bridge was up and collapsed mid-crossing. And then you get into the campsite and are surprised to find it devoid of human life. It would also make the clipboard a little extra creepy. As if "they" wanted you to find it. Rest of the game is great. It's just this one moment that really irks me. | | | |
| 2.1.3 | Originally posted by There's my chippy: Also - you can climb a chain link fence. Also - why don't you have an axe already Didn't the fence have a barbed wire spiral at the top? Also remember that he's got a lot of weight on him from the backpack. It's one thing to use a rope to assist climbing up a steep slope. It's another to climb a chain link fence. As for the axe, I don't think that's within the job duties of a lookout. Controlled burns and fire rescue are done by an external crew, for example. | | | |
| 2.1.4 | You throw a thick blanket or something over those things at the top of a chain link fence and that neutralizes them. They just slow you down, they don't stop you. As for the axe - Maybe not? I find it weird that you have nothing for clearing brush to help you get around. No machete even? Maybe a machete wouldn't help you get past the chain link fence but those barriers of overgrown plants are pure videogame logic. | | | |
| 2.1.5 | Because a hiker, eight miles from civilization, carries around a heavy blanket around in case there's a fence-- that's not on any map he's been given-- that he needs to cross. | | | |

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| | No, sorry. The smart thing to do is to report it (which he did), make sure it's not on fire (which he did), and stay the heck away. Let people who are the actual authorities deal with it. | | | |
| 2.1.6 | Heavy blankets have other uses... as for whether or not it was smart to try to get in the fence, that's what you end up doing... | | | |
| 2.1.7 | you're missing the fact that that camp was already abandoned for many years, so the bridge collapsed | | | |
| 2.1.8 | The stupid part isn't the camp being abandoned. The stupid part is that both characters assume there's a fire team in the camp, and that they would be in said camp even though there's no bridge. | | | |
| 2.1.11 | Originally posted by There's my chippy: I had an epiphany - I didn't dislike this game because I noticed stuff like this. I noticed stuff like this because I disliked this game. No you don't. You love this game. You think it's awesome. You're noticing this stuff because picking up on details is what happens when you pay attention. Originally posted by There's my chippy: But I-- Ahhh-- [shushes you by putting a finger over your mouth] Shhhh.... you love it.....Forrest: | | | |
| 3.1 | Is this a real job? I mean, I could see myself doing something like this. But, is this a real job? Did somebody did something like this? | | | |
| 3.1.1 | As far as I am aware, VERY VERY YES this is a real thing. I doubt you can just walk up and get your own fire watch station job as an entry level thing (Meaning without training and/or some kind of certifications like a diploma or something) but yeah, talk to your local park rangers and ask. | | | |
| 3.1.2 | Thank you! I was trying to find something like it online in germany, but with no success. But I will ask, thanks! | | | |
| 3.1.3 | In Germany there as far as I know no "Firewatcher" jobs since it's not a problem. The closest I think you can come to it is to become a forest guard/Forstbeamter but those don't usually live in the forest. | | | |
| 3.1.4 | That's probably close enough. My cousin's husband was a Ranger and they had to live pretty close to the area he was responsible for. | | | |
| 3.1.6 | Sorry for the late reply. I am a Forest Service employee IRL. Yes, a Fire Lookout is indeed a real job! | | | |
| 5.1 | Gameplay ideas. Add yours... The game is obviously lacking in actual gameplay, so what ideas do you have for how to make this game fun? | | | |

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| | <p>I'll start...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Collect unused fireworks and set them off... at night time when it's normal to set fireworks off. Sure, the radio woman won't be happy, but just blame it on the girls. * Take photos of fireworks that you set off. * Push boulders off cliff. * Get drunk and destroy the outhouse. Set outhouse on fire then extinguish with fire extinguisher. * Put the girls underwear in a lock box for someone else to find. * Creep over to Delilah's tower at night, get drunk and sleep with her. * Instead of just talking about bears, actually wrestle with one, or run away from one that's chasing you. * Instead of just talking about someone stalking you, set a trap to ambush them. * Get a dirt bike and hoon around the map, jumping off rocks and so on. * Take bottle of bleach out of there, back to your car, because bleach does not belong in the wilderness. <p>There really is endless possibilities, none of which were realized in the game we ended up with.</p> | | | |
| 5.1.1 | Totally agree! I'm missing the CHOICES in this game, a lot of stuff just laying around, can't really be used for anything.. Give me a CHOICE! I WANNA GET DRUNK, fall of a cliff, drown in the lake, make forrest fire, hump Delilah! See Julia! Anything.. | | | |
| 5.1.2 | Thanks for the laugh. But maybe you should just play GTA instead. | | | |
| 5.1.3 | It's not really lacking in gameplay, it does the job. Of course a few more silly things to do wouldn't hurt the game. But it's lacking in well, the end story was horrible - so IMO it should've been a bit longer and had a few more months in the oven, just to flesh out the game. But gameplay and such it's fine - i wasnt really expecting anything anyway. | | | |
| 5.1.4 | lol I really hope this post is satire because if so, well done | | | |
| 5.1.5 | <p>I only consider a game worth my money if my play hours exceed the pricetag. I still need to play 16 hours to justify my purchase... Oh boy.</p> <p>I think I'll try being a dumb ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥ on my next run.</p> <p>The choices in the prologue immediately gave me the impression that the game's gimmick is "emotional intelligence", something which I'm not fully convinced actually exists, seeing as all legitimately smart people I know are also good with people.</p> | | | |

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| 5.1.6 | <p>Originally posted by OvenBaked: The interwebs is seriously satirical.</p> <p>No really.. I wanted to bang the woman but it never happened.</p> <p>The most we get is some porn drawings of our own fat-♥♥♥ character posing like a fa- g. So naturally in frustration I wanted to roll some boulders down the hill, or burn down the out-house. what the ♥♥♥♥ kinda game did you expect...</p> | | | |
| 5.1.7 | <p>i'd like to fish , i'd like to discover species, i'd like to help lost people, i'd like to do so much other thing in those wonderful landscapes than talking in talky walky with someone we cannot see.. The game is nice but with some more thing to do, it'll be wonderful..</p> | | | |
| 5.1.8 | <p>Good idea! Fishing would be cool. Then cook it up on the stove.</p> <p>Helping lost people is an excellent idea and wouldn't be difficult to program. Just have them follow you to the path.</p> | | | |
| 5.1.9 | <p>Because we don't have enough boring dull escort quests in gaming already.. If you're gonna make "helping lost people" fun and engaging, you'd need a lot more than "have them follow you around".</p> | | | |
| 5.1.10 | <p>The lacking gameplay is my greatest issue with this game. We had to unlock every yellow box (pretty dull), but were not given the choice to lock them again. It would have been more funny if we had to deal with book thieves or something. The dialogue could have been affected by Henrys mood (bored by lack of books, exhausted by to much fast running, relaxed by dwelling a couple of extra minutes at a nice spot)</p> | | | |
| 5.1.11 | <p>but dude if they let you see Delilah then it would ruin everything, now that you've spent several hours talking to her and listening to her you have an expectation and everyone has their own expectation and if you've seen her it would ruin your expectations cuz the devs would've made her not as you thought</p> | | | |
| 5.2 | <p>Is this game scary? I don't know much about the actual gameplay, and I really can't handle games with any degree of horror. Jump scares, psychological horror, dark places where I'm walking around with a flashlight looking for trouble... anything. Can anyone give me a spoiler free answer?</p> | | | |
| 5.2.1 | <p>Nah, theres no horror or jumpscares or anything, though the environment can look a little unsettling when it gets darker outside on certain days. It'd honestly be a great setting for a horror type of game, if they'd chose to make it one.</p> <p>As the story unfolds, theres this creeping feeling of paranoia that gets worse and worse to the point where I was actually looking behind me at a few points in the game. The voice acting is top notch, and you can actually hear you and her getting more and more freaked out and unsure of everything, and it sounds completley natural, which really adds more to it.</p> <p>Excellent game, if a little short.well.. i'd argue a little too short. Even taking my time and exploring I finished it in a little over 4 hours, which normally i'd be more upset about, if it wasn't for everything in the game being so top notch.</p> | | | |

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| | ((Except that ending. Ughhh. But thats a different can of worms.)) | | | |
| 5.2.2 | <p>There actually is one jump scare in the game, which you may or may not get to see depending on how you play. Firewatch is no horror game though. The game can be pretty intense at times, but there are no monsters or anything like that.</p> <p>I also don't like horror games and I hate jump scares and things like that. I can assure you that Firewatch is pretty harmless in that regard, so don't worry about it.</p> | | | |
| 5.2.3 | It'll put you on the edge of your damn seat due to the suspense and tension but there's no jumps or scares | | | |
| 5.2.8 | There are no jumpscares in the game, but sometimes, when the music stops, it feels a little bit wierd. Like something is watching you, or that there will be something chasing you in a second. | | | |
| 5.2.9 5.2.11 | <p>Has a x-files feel sometimes.</p> <p>The atmosphere can feel a little foreboding and lonely at times...which was the point of the game...other than that its not scary in a traditional sense</p> | | | |
| 5.2.13 | <p>If I'd known that there would be no jumpscares or horror, It'd have been far less scary to me. I went into this without knowing what would happen. Near the end, the game got on my nerves so much that I switched off the audio, and went by subtitles.</p> <p>It had that feeling that any second now the shoe would drop, and you'd be swarmed by zombies, aliens, rabid dire bears from a mad scientist program, etc.</p> <p>I kind of hated that, but afterwards I've got to admit, it's quite an achievement for the devs. I started to become scared by the auto-save icon and the moments when a completely innocuous soundtrack started playing.</p> | | | |
| 5.2.14 | <p>I bought the game this morning when being bored. I watched a video on games with good stories and the game popped up, and i had never heard of it before. Searched it on steam and it was on 75% sale, so i just bought it and started.</p> <p>As im writing this i have just finished the game (not 100% but at least gone through the whole story). When i started it just seemed like an interesting game, and the second it felt like it was about to become scary i paused to search up if it actually was scary and landed on this thread.</p> <p>I am about just the same as the OP, because even though i don't have any problem watching scary movies, any horror game will psyche me out. Anyways, i read the answers and decided to keep playing.</p> <p>After i have played through the game, i can say definetly for sure that even though it isn't labeled as a scary game, my heart was probably hitting peak rates during much of the game.</p> <p>It was a really well made game, even though too short. The voice acting was brilliant, the storyline was well written and a really creative concept.</p> <p>Even though OP probably have played through the game by now. To anyone coming on this thread because they can relate to OP. I am the same, and the honest answer is that this game will probably make you anxious and nervous</p> | | | |

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| | and probably scared, but it's still playable, and totally worth it for the story. | | | |
| 5.2.15 | I would say it has some horror-like attribute to it. The sounds that the game developers chose to use in the game makes the experience uneasy and creepy to be honest. I had a hard time listening to it as I try to hike up to find out what the hell is going on around here. Who else is out here? Where is this person? Why are they doing this? Am I going to get sucker punched again? | | | |
| 5.2.16 | I'm much the same -- I don't like horror. I can handle (and often enjoy) a reasonable amount of suspense, and although this game did set my anxiety on edge at times, it may help to know that the fear is mostly unfounded -- there is one discovery which is more tragic than scary, but you will have been well prepared for it by then | | | |
| 5.3 | <p>[Spoilers] disappointing ending / Your opinion</p> <p>So from the very first beginning where delilah accidentally left her microphone activated while talking off screen I was like "Woah ok there is something in the bushes here. Something about this is not right. Is it an experiment?"</p> <p>Then later D. even said herself : "So you think it is an experiment to put two people out in the wildness?" I was "WOAH".</p> <p>To make it short: The whole time the game built up a great atmosphere. It gives you the feeling that something creepy is going on and all the time you can't really say what D. is actually up to (imo). And then it comes to the ending. Ok (SPOILER) it was ned that killed brian and that did all this stuff I was like "meh. Nope there is more". Then D. wanted to hurry and the game still had this great tension.</p> <p>Then I stood in front of her tower and I knew "Ok in there there will be THE SECRET Something that gives me a moment of just pure "WTF". What will I find".</p> <p>You climb up the stairs. No one there. ok. And the drawing says "What we know". That tbh gave me the feeling like ok there is more.</p> <p>And then you finally talk to delilah AND:.</p> <p>nothing.</p> <p>just nothing. All this time the game built up to be "What is going on?!". And srsly it was only ned?! Only a lonely creep?!. This is by far the mos disappointed ending I met in my last gaming years. And this is why my overall thoughts about this game get stomped into the ground.</p> <p>And that you actually never see Delilah is pure crap I mean you even see Henry (in the credits) and on photos..</p> <p>What is your opinion? Were mine too high?</p> | | | |
| 5.3.1 | It's a while ago when i played this game, but i felt exactly the same as you. To be honest for me it was like "here is the moment when they run out of money to pay the author who wrote the story, and the intern had to wrap it up" | | | |
| 5.3.2 | That sums it up pretty good. Also I now have the feeling that it makes almost no change concerning what options you chose to say.e.g.: If you cheat on Julia or not does not change the ending I guess. | | | |
| 5.3.3 | I don't mind the idea that it wasn't really a huge government conspiracy and it was really just nothing all along and it was only you blowing things out of proportion but like...the ending is just a wet fart. It doesn't end with heartbreak, | | | |

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| | <p>it doesn't end with you flying over a helicopter looking at all the places you've been or with any kind of solid final scene or whatever it's just...nothing.</p> <p>And I don't mind an open ending, even if at the end D was like "Maybe we can talk over drinks" if you chose the correct options for her it would have at least been SOMETHING. But instead it's nothing. I really enjoyed the game but I agree the ending wasn't great</p> | | | |
| <p>5.3.4</p> | <p>I actually kind of liked it. This was a game based solidly in reality, and in reality there's not always a happy ending where you get the girl, or some sort of government conspiracy. You go on an adventure, and when it ends you move on with your life. Delilah said it herself that Henry should go back to his wife, which was the right thing to do</p> | | | |
| <p>5.3.5</p> | <p>I partially felt the same as you op, but after finishing the game for the first time in one sitting last night, I took some time to think about it. I can understand the disappointment in the ending, however I think it stems more from we as consumers being used to happy endings, or having a story end in the way we expect. Firewatch on the other hand deals with some very real world issues. It's not just about a summer job as a firewatcher, but of a husband who has seen his wife slip away from him into early onset dementia. He's watched his wife spiral into an ever worsening condition and is helpless to do a thing about it, so in the end he runs away. Right or wrong, it's a very human reaction on his part.</p> <p>When things start getting weird in the forest, and Henry doesn't understand what's going on, those feelings of being helpless, being out of control come slamming back down on him full force. Those feelings he was running away from, the reason he took the job in the first place, are right back in front of him. Even though it turns out to be a far less serious issue than he believes, the fear of the unknown, coupled with his past experience and a dash of ongoing solitude, makes him turn a molehill into a mountain as they say. Under the hood, Henry is dealing with much more than is right in front of him, whether he wants to acknowledge it or not.</p> <p>Now we take into account Delilah, who has been at this job for many years. If you read the notes about her along the way, and get the right dialogue options, you find out she is borderline alcoholic and narcissistic, she has a boyfriend she's cheated on several times, a sister she doesn't get along with, and a strained past with her mother. Taking all that into account, she took the job for pretty much the same reason as Henry did. She basically wants to escape her own life.</p> <p>During the story, she finds out that because of her need to escape, and unwillingness to do anything that takes her out of the comfortable little bubble she lives inside of during her summers working, a young boy died. She knows that if she had done what she was supposed to do, that child might very well still be alive. At the end of the story, the sheer weight of that guilt is crushing her under it's weight. She knows she'll never return to that job, and even states it in the dialouge.</p> <p>So at the end of the story, we have a man who tried to run away from his problems, and at the end of the summer, is no further away from them than when he started, and a woman dealing with crippling amounts of guilt due to her not wanting to just deal with her own life, and take personal responsibility when it was obviously clear she should have. Taking all that into account, I do still think firewatch's story left a lot to be desired, not because it was a bad</p> | | | |

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| | <p>ending to the story, but because it was a very human and realistic ending.</p> <p>In fact, it can probably be strongly argued, that it wasn't an ending at all, because we are left wondering what happened next. Life almost never wraps things up in a nice neat little bow, and neither did firewatch. What really happens to Henry and Delilah after the game ends? Does Henry go back to his wife? Does he keep running away from the problem? Does Delilah manage to move past the guilt that she feels? Or does she wind up putting down a fifth of whiskey one night, putting a gun in her mouth and pulling the trigger? These are all questions we'll probably know the answer to, and at the end of the day I think it's those unanswered questions, that not knowing, that has left such a bad taste in people's mouths. It's not a traditional video game ending and firewatch isn't exactly a traditional video game.</p> <p>That's my two cents worth on the issue...take it as you will.</p> | | | |
| 5.3.6 | <p>I agree with kaden auduin on the "borderline" aspect of Delilah. I believe she share some of the traits of the mental illness known as borderline personality: "history of unstable relationships" (own family, love relationships), "difficulty feeling empathy for others" (lied to to the police about the girls disapperance, did not wait for Henry at the end), "impulsivity" (wanted to burn down the research camp), "feelings of isolation boredom and emptiness" (always on close contact with henry...), "persistent fear of abandonment and rejection" (... while at the same time keeping him at a distance). I wonder if the development team had that in mind when they created Delilah. Well if so, they did a great job!</p> | | | |
| 5.3.7 | <p>I liked it the way it is.</p> <p>Make no mistake, we ALL would have liked that other conclusion with Henry and Delilah, myself included.</p> <p>But in our present time, where all games offers us many choices to lead to tailored ending, it's nice to have something else.</p> <p>For me (and I kinda knew it before playing), Firewatch game is like a book. And like a book, you read it and at some point you really hoped or wished that this or that did or didn't happen, and the more you got to the end, you hoped (or not) that it would or not end like it did. You couldn't do anything about it. I was written like that.</p> <p>Like the books, Firewatch was like that too. A kind of reminder that like in real life, things doesn't always go the way you want.</p> | | | |
| 5.3.8 | <p>I just finished the game, was in my backlog... I enjoyed the journey but was really disapointed by the ending. I wanted some closure with Julia. Even if a sad one.</p> | | | |
| 5.3.9 | <p>It's a beautiful ending. It seems that people who complain about it are way too deep in the mainstream culture.</p> | | | |
| 5.3.10 | <p>shallow ending, only one ending (okay, 1.5 if that alternative one is not a plain oversight), no replayability.</p> | | | |

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| 5.3.11 | As I tried to make clear it is mainly disappointing bc the game acts all the time as it would build up something completls different plus ur choices barely matter | | | |
| 5.3.13 | Yeah, but there was one important choice in Firewatch which changed " my " Ending i found and heroically saved the turtle Turt Reynolds from a bush fire | | | |
| 5.3.14 | Yeap apart from optional missable things which are all included in achievements — but still can't call those long-going choices :hee: I guess with bigger budget those devs could really make some greater stuff comparable to Portal 2 storyline-wise for example (which is totally linear as well, but at least no illusionary choices). Heard they're working for Valve now, let's see if it was worth it. | | | |
| 5.3.15 | Idk stories of mel for example is a not valve-made mod is insanely good! Seriously it could be named "Portal: Part 2" and no one would notice, that it isnt valve made. Not being a big player, doesnt have to mean something but I get your point. | | | |
| 5.3.16 | hm.. maybe it's just me but it's really like a book and it's good this way. Henry tried to escape his current life with this job ad and in the end he perhabs understood that he has to face his past (julia), otherwise he would end up like Ned....never forgiving himself | | | |
| 6.1 | Collecting the books I really thought I should bring all those books into my cabin, and of course it took A LONG TIME to move the books one by one from the cache crates all the way to the cabin and throwing them from the window until I had to fix it. I really thought I should collect those books. How did I manage to bring them inside? Through the hole in a broken window :D A Screenshot of Firewatch By: Valet2 Then I realized that I missed one of the books, probably it just disappeared for some reason because I left it outside of the crate. Started googling, and it came out that the books have nothing to do with the game. But it's possible to put them on a shelf. What else should I know before wasting hours and hours by doing something weird? | | | |
| 6.1.1 | You could probably not get an achievement for lugging the Forrest Burns cutout to various locations and taking pictures with him. Actually, Devs, this might be a fun contest: Top Five Pointless (but plausible) Things To Do and have them made into achievements for the second anniversary, coming up in February. | | | |
| 6.1.2 | Ahaha, thanks for the idea! He's currently in my house. I though it might be funny if someone comes to the tower in the night and sees the silouette. Yeah, I've probably played the game too much. 6 hours, and just started the | | | |

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| | day 3. | | | |
| 6.2 | <p>I LOVED the ending It was just like life, in that you expect so much (forgetting about your wife, getting together with D, and happy everafter) but that all those plans, when confronted with reality, falls flat on its face.</p> <p>The ending kept me thinking about it for the rest of the day, which not a lot of games manage to do. Well done devs.</p> | | | |
| 6.2.1 | <p>Yeah, the ending really shows what reality is like. It's a shame that everyone doesn't actually understand the ending. *cough* *cough* ign *cough* *cough*</p> | | | |
| 6.2.2 | <p>You and D have ran away from problems getting there, so in the end Deliah decision of running away from you and her problems fits with her character pefectly. Also, it is interesting the fact that you don't know for sure who is lying; Ned saying that D has an actual partnet and she usually cheats on him (he has been stalking her comms three years), or D saying that she is single actually.</p> <p>Strong narrative driven by its characters, one of the best stories I have played in years.</p> | | | |
| 6.2.3 | <p>Yah. And it's nice when authors trust us to understand subtext and implication, rather than spoonfeed us like we're idiots.</p> | | | |
| 6.2.5 | <p>Same for me. I felt a mix of emotions after finishing the game, and it kept me thinking about it for several days afterwards. Easily one of the best storylines i've experienced, even for such a short game!</p> | | | |
| 6.2.6 | <p>Yeah, same here, I liked the ending, although I really felt disappointed about D. What I noticed when looking at the closing credits (and at the photos left on the camera from the time before you found it in the game): the whole game is about loosing someone and about same ways of coping (i.e. running away from it): loosing your wife, losing a partner about an affair, loosing your son, loosing the connection to someone you started to fell in love with, loosing access to the wonderful place you have been living in for 80 days.</p> | | | |
| 6.3 | <p>Did anyone do their camera roll? I don't know if the steam version has the camera roll as I have the other version but did anyone here do the camera roll and send off for prints?</p> | | | |
| 6.3.1 | <p>I took shots throughout my play, managed to fill the roll with significant pics. Wouldn't know why to print them though. Non-Steam version btw.</p> | | | |
| 6.3.2 | <p>It's in the main menu look at extras There was an option there to get your roll printed. You had to send away for it.</p> | | | |
| 6.3.3 | <p>I know what you mean, I saw the option. I don't see why I would go through all the trouble of sending, paying and waiting when I could make prints right here at home though.</p> <p>The whole point eludes me to be honest. It's not that I'm making screenshots</p> | | | |

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| | every couple of minutes of every game I play, let alone that I print them. I'm not being particularly useful here, am I? My apologies | | | |
| 6.3.4 | No, no you're fine. I just wonder how many people would have done that option from the game. I was thinking about it then realized I can just screencap and have them on my desktop whenever I want.. | | | |
| 6.3.5 | To be honest I kind of expected that the photos would have some significance in the game. Apart from the option to buy them in print I haven't found any use for them (yet). Minibummer if you ask me. | | | |
| 6.3.6 | IKR I thought taking photos would lead to clues or become clues later. | | | |
| 6.3.8 | I did it. if you send away for it you get a few extra photos that were already taken that you never get to see in the game unless you develop em. | | | |
| 6.3.9 | Ah, right. Makes sense tbh, since you find the camera somewhere. Did those extra photos reveal anything important or relevant? In other words: was it worth it? | | | |
| 6.3.10 | Yep, from my point of view, they do. But that depends on how emotionally bonded you are to the game's story. Not to spoil to much here: The photos and the game are about a significant loss in one's life, on several levels - and photographs are memories of moments you (or someone else) lost ... | | | |
| 7.1 | Henry's map is unrealistically flexible. As someone who has worked in jobs in the past (gas leak survey technician) that require the use of large maps and orienteering skills, I find the map in the game to be unrealistically represented. Don't get me wrong: I love the map in Firewatch. I love the way it (and other objects) react with physics and Henry's movements. But sometimes, in the goal of realism, things can become unrealistic. Let's look at some of the ways the map is unlike a map in real life. 1.) The map is too pristine. It's a large map. Much larger than Henry's hands or pockets. So, where does he store it when not looking at it? Conventional and professional wisdom says that Henry would probably fold the map up and put it in his pocket or backpack, right? But there are no creases in it at all! Not to mention the random wear and tear that occurs from using the map often. It seems like every time Henry pulls out his map, he's printing out a brand new copy on fresh paper. 2.) Even if we disregard the paper folding error, the map is far too sturdy in Henry's hand. It magically stays straight throughout the usable map portion of the paper, despite Henry's hand only being able to prop up about a quarter of it. There's clearly no clipboard there. This goes hand-in-hand with the folding issue. The folds put into the map actually increase its sturdiness, even when fully unfurled. 3.) Gallon-size Ziploc bags for the rain. This is orienteering 101, but Henry just throws logic to the wind and pulls out his magic map in the middle of storms, seemingly unaffected by the deluge of water. Henry needs to keep a bag | | | |

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| | <p>handy or else he'll have to print out even more magic paper.</p> <p>In conclusion, I urge Campo Santo to update this beautiful game to create the most beautiful and realistic in-game map of all time. Or make it in your next game. Have a nice day!</p> | | | |
| 7.1.1 | Depends what material the map it is made out. Although waterproof maps exist (depending which company you buy the map from), couldn't tell you if waterproofing existed back in 1985. | | | |
| 7.1.2 | Are you seriously complaining about a virtual map in a game? | | | |
| 7.1.3 | So this is what it has all come to | | | |
| 7.1.4 | Just bought the game. Holy ♥♥♥♥ im excited it must be really good if THIS is the complaing tbis guy has about it | | | |
| 7.1.5 | do yourself a favor, openyour game up again, walk outside, beautiful game and all, its NOT real life. stop comparing it to real life | | | |
| 7.1.6 | this game must be the world best game.. If players become so picky that they have to complain about a map in a GAME. You know, that unrealistic thing that never become so realistic as life. | | | |
| 7.1.7 | It's a clearly a tounge in cheek post (and a good one at that), chill out guys. | | | |
| 7.1.8 | wait what, are you seriously complaining about a virtual map? this is a VIDEO GAME. | | | |
| 7.2 | <p>Here is an ending i was hoping for</p> <p>It's clear that the ending was pretty sloppy to my taste (maybe it was on purpose, i don't know). I felt in love with the thriller built through the journey, and the relationship of the protagonists, so i was expecting the ending to play strong with those elements, something like this:</p> <p>That Brian and his Dad disapearence were the result of them discovering something forbidden occurring in the woods. That when Henry enters the restricted area, he discovers too some kind of conspiracy, or secret lab that develops strange technology, and becomes the target of the higher ups of that place.</p> <p>He has to survive and Delilah helps him (pretty much the same way that he does in the game), but when things get really hard, and he finally goes to meet her to elaborate a plan, all he finds in her base is a huge working system of cassettes, recorders, monitors, speakers, etc.</p> <p>Then he discovers the truth, Delilah is this system, "she" is some kind of A.I. created with this system (in the same way Armin Sola is "virtual" in Civil War), and the creators where testing "her" to see if she could work in the real world (like a Turing test).</p> <p>And you could end by destroyng "her", saving "her" in some advanced cd and run away, killing yourself and letting "her" alone, etc.</p> <p>And no matter the optional ending shows up, the final cut would be the higher ups saying "So, Delilah passed the test, it works"</p> | | | |

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| | And you people, what kind of ending were you expecting? | | | |
| 7.2.1 | What made me wish for a sco fi ending was the detail about the new navigator, it was inside a restricted area and was super high tech that they didn't have idea, so i started to fantasize about it | | | |
| 7.2.2 | I think you missed the entire point of the game. | | | |
| 7.2.3 | No i didn't, i just didn't enjoy the ending as the conclusion of a very well constructed thriller | | | |
| 7.2.4 | <p>The point is that the thriller you constructed in your head doesn't exist. it's a rug pull on the player.</p> <p>That said, I was disappointed in the ending because of Brian's D&D map. On the one hand we have the thriller story that doesn't exist, and on the other we have the attempt at normalcy and trust.</p> <p>And Brian's map clearly means the thriller is real because it shows the fenced in area that Delila claims not to know about, ergo she does know about it and the project there and is lying to you. Except that the end of the game is that she doesn't.</p> <p>I don't mind being led into a state where I'm trying to fend off paranoia to determine what's real and what isn't. That can be fun if I'm in the mood for it. I do object to being given completely wrong information instead of simply making the wrong inferences. One is my fault/the intention of the game/thing the game is trying to comment on, the other is the creator's fault for outright lying.</p> | | | |
| 7.2.5 | The ending I wanted was that we got to meet Delilah and see what she looked like and they flow off together in the rescue chopper. I was hoping for a proper happy ending. | | | |
| 7.2.7 | I'd have been much happier if Delilah was a rack of tapes or disks haha,. Ending is a little disappointing regardless of what choices you make. | | | |
| 7.2.8 | Yeah, it's like Mysti says, there actually isn't a thriller, it was a big lie, the secret camp, the advanced navigator, the firefighters base that wasn't there, etc. | | | |
| 7.2.9 | So what was the whole point? Seems pointless now that I've done the whole game. | | | |
| 7.2.10 | Well it was just about the journey, not the destination, at the end of the day it's a walk simulator basically. | | | |
| 7.2.13 | The beautiful thing about the ending is that it mirrors Henry's feelings. He too is disappointed that there isn't some big story behind it all; that he never met Delilah, etc. The player is given a realistic ending, which, for me at least, adds to the experience. Henry probably is wondering the point of his endeavors as well. I think that trying to make the ending something more would completely change the game, and make it so much less meaningful. | | | |
| 8.1 | *SPOILER WARNING* What was the "antagonist's" motivation? I finished the game and I really don't get it. | | | |

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| | <p>Why did Ned do everything he did? Why did he stalk Henry, even knocking him out? Why was he listening to the communications? Why did he make fake reports? Why "lock up" Henry in the cave? Why did he generally mess around with Henry and Delilah? If it was to prevent them from finding out about his boy, wouldn't it have been smarter to just ignore them as they would have never found out about him without his meddling?</p> | | | |
| 8.1.1 | <p>I just finished the game and I wonder the same thing. It's like it was set up for something bigger and a more dramatic finish and then... it was just a big let down. And to top it off there wasn't closure since we don't know what happens with Henry and Delilah at the end either. :(</p> | | | |
| 8.2 | <p>[Spoilers] So Many Questions The ending of this game leaves with so many questions.</p> <p>Why didn't we ever get to see Delilah, the whole game built up Henry and Delilah's bond and then we don't even get to see her because she couldn't wait a minute longer like why?</p> <p>Why does Ned write down a transcript with what you said, and threaten you with tapes, his threats don't mean anything when he can't act on them and there are much better ways to keep you away from his son's body (just putting the pack at his hideout?)</p> <p>How did the elk die, I'd assume Ned because of the collar but Ned didn't seem to have any skinning equipment and he didn't skin or do anything with the elk?</p> <p>What is Delilah talking about when she leaves her mic on, she says you don't know anything but is this just a thing to throw you off the trail of this bad mystery?</p> <p>I still don't think it's explained how the fence got set up, what I got was it was some military set up that Ned broke into and took over but that raises more questions and maybe I just missed something?</p> <p>Why does their suspectibility to manipulation matter and how does Ned know Delilah has a boyfriend still and flirts with other guys, or why does he think that, and why does Henry have practically no reaction to seeing that?</p> <p>Overall this game feels really good at first with the conversation between Delilah and Henry and the beautiful sights but the mystery part just ruins the game, yes seeing Brian's body was jarring but there was no reason to make it a mystery and maybe more of something you just find in the game not the main point. I would've liked this game so much more if it focused on Delilah and Henry's problems and them working through it together and meeting up and talking in person as the ending at Two Forks (maybe they sit down and you guide the conversation and can choose to flirt or stay more of a friends thing). This game ending just seems like a bad one that ruins how good this game was, it makes more questions that make no sense then answers and nothing really results from it, you find Brian's body and Ned's Bunker but those could've just been secrets that you find naturally in the game and shoke you and tell an indirect story while focusing more on Delilah and Henry and their relationship or at least their problems.</p> | | | |

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| 8.2.1 | <p>It can also be argued that it makes things more realistic; unanswered questions and dangling scenarios happen in Real Life all the time.</p> <p>I wouldn't try to argue against your opinions, but I will say that the debates involved here will be subjective and won't really have adequate resolutions.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.2 | <p>I disagree on the ending. The three characters all had one thing in common, and that was all three were running from responsibility.</p> <p>Henry was running away from his ailing wife, this was blantant. Ned was running away from facing the responsibility he faced of his son's death, be it accidental or otherwise. Deliah rounded the three at the end, blaming herself for Ned's son, to the point where she questions if she should report the body, and the questioning that would follow if she did.</p> <p>The ending had Deliah reponding to it all by being unwilling to meet up with Henry, basically saying she had no intention to. This was because Henry was her escape from her own responsibilities, same can be said for Henry, and it would be best to not meet in order to not follow that fantasy they made for each other, and actually face their real life problems.</p> <p>I feel the ending was good, and I think you're possibly looking way too deeply into many of the fact. The storyteller will only tell you information he wants you to know, and deeper investigations just chase at shadows.</p> <p>I do agree with Deliah's side conversation though, dunno what that was about.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.3 | <p>I figured that was either with another lookout or with one of Delilah's bosses. It would have been nice to have it followed up, otherwise it does sound kinda weird in a paranoia sort of way.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.4 | <p>Think of it like this:</p> <p>When the communication lines went down and Delilah was talking to some unknown other person, how could she? Who was she talking to? Why did she ask "Do you think he knows?"?</p> <p>Walkie talkies can't be tapped. They're two-way radios. There's no reason for Delilah to get a new walkie talkie, when they should just change the channel. Anyone with any real experience with them knows that. Especially a firewatch veteran like Delilah.</p> <p>About that. How did Delilah walk 20+ miles from her tower, to Cottonwood Creek, and back, all before noon?</p> <p>Delilah almost certainly knew about Ned's existence, and was working with Ned. She was talking to him by a different walkie talkie when the communication lines went down. She was trying to distract you and relieve your anxiety about being 'tapped', by delivering a new walkie talkie. And by her delivering it, I mean Ned delivering it. He lived right nearby. And it really wasn't new. It was an old one that, say, Ned might have lying around...</p> | | | |

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| | Once you give the story a bit of thought, it isn't nearly as disappointing as it was before. | | | |
| 8.2.5 | <p>so i spent the entire game thinking Delilah was playing Henry due to the accidental slip she had on the walkie talkie. I was sure she was using Henry for some big reason, but it never happened.</p> <p>so i too was disappointed with the ending, since so many optional endings were all set up and available. When Delilah took that helicopter without waiting for Henry, I thought for sure she was involved with the death of Ned's son or the research behind the fence and would leave Henry to burn (no helicopter coming) and get rid of a witness.</p> <p>also, when i was in the SE territory near the fire break, i noticed text indicating i was at Delilah's tower. but i never saw any tower and was wondering if she really existed or was someone somewhere other than on the map. it was disappointing not even getting a glimpse of delilah. and..what was the drawing of Henry in the tower near the helicopter? was Delilah dissing him? i regularly thought he was better not getting to know her any further. she lacked a bit of character.</p> <p>anyway, this game was one of a few that had me wanting to go back to my computer and play more! so i really did enjoy it a lot, just not crazy about the ending and the things left not making sense. plus, i bought it on sale for like \$4.99, which i think was a great bargain for all the game had to offer.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.6 | I dunno, I feel like her existing only as a voice was kinda a good gimmick. More mysterious and fantastical in a game otherwise VERY rooted in reality. Makes a change from the manic pixie girlfriend, at least. | | | |
| 8.2.7 | On like day 2 or 3 in the morning she asks you questions about what you look like and says she's drawing you I believe and then that's the drawing of what she drew of you depending on your replies, I'm kind of split now, the mysteriousness and open endedness of everything leaves everything up to you in the end, you can think of the endless amount of things that possibly happened in the future but then at the same time it felt like the whole game was leading to seeing Delilah, I feel like maybe they should've added a few different ending based on your responses and such, then again I don't know how hard that'd be to code in and they're a (from what I know) new indie company, overall I loved the game for what it was though, gave me a cry and I'm looking forward to their enxt game | | | |
| 8.2.8 | I assume you're referring to Waipiti Station? Yeah, you can see Delilah's lookout as you head down to the Scientists. But if the station is not only in plain sight, but as the Park manager she would know full well that the scientists were there. On top of that, the scientists hadn't been to the station in months! So why was Delilah so shocked? Maybe it's worth a bit of a think! The answer is certainly there, and it's awesome when you piece everything together. | | | |
| 8.2.9 | I thought she was shocked because she assumed they were doing that research on the frog species in the area and then there were all these notes that didn't make sense that you describe to her, plus the game is supposed to portray real life, just because something happens doesn't mean it's abnormal as the game shows you multiple times with the girls and Ned, the scientists | | | |

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| | <p>might've collected the data they needed and left maybe their radio tower was down or something and they didn't think it'd be a big deal, or if you really want to be extreme maybe Ned killed them because he was in a bad place, the game leaves many unanswered questions which can be seen as really ♥♥♥♥♥♥ storytelling or really good storytelling by letting you imagine what happened</p> | | | |
| 8.2.10 | <p>I want to think that Delilah just doesn't exist, because this will explain a lot of things, but the record that Ned do of Henry talking with Delilah.... I really dont know.</p> <p>Just finished the game and let me in "shock". Because i was expecting about another map zone or something, and just ended like "that's all" with soooooooooo unanswered questions.</p> <p>Enjoyed the game, but the way it gets "solved" at the end let me with cold sensations.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.11 | <p>Well also she draws a picture of you , leaves a radio for you, and then the recording so she has to exist unless Henry just even imagines physical things happening and then you go into questioning if he's even really there at the park or maybe he's in a hospital in a coma or something which just becomes more of a mess and gives more problems then it solves</p> | | | |
| 8.2.12 | <p>Yeah, I have to agree. She's like an internet friend more than a non-existing one-- She's real, she exists, just not in a traditional, tangible way. I mean, heck, the people on these very forums have as much "reality" as Delilah does. (Even the trolls and sock puppets.) Added to that, she has an impact on Henry's reality-- the radios being the most literal and tangible, but she leads him to the downed wires-- there's no freakin' way he would have even thought to look for them without her prompting.</p> <p>The only other option that makes sense to me is literally NOTHING being real. Which I suppose is possib;e but there's no decent place of transition for that to be an option.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.13 | <p>There is the blackout when Henry walks to his truck and the screen goes black before showing you at the Camp so as I said theortically Henry could go in a coma or something at that point and have that be the transition point but that makes the whole game absolute and there's no real evidence to suggest that</p> | | | |
| 8.2.14 | <p>That's why I said "I want to think" but I know it isn't. There are physical evidences, but ¿What about the way she just leave her firetower? Or she really doesn't describe herself, you can only figure that with the notes that Ned leaves in his camp.</p> <p>Or the conversation about Delilah and someone that you just doesn't know who is it. I don't know, but if she's real she's not who she tells to be.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.15 | <p>Ok so i played through the game a second time and i believe now i have a very good grip on the story and characters. The ending makes great sense and is very fulfilling.</p> <p>The most important thing to realize is that Delilah is lying to you about many</p> | | | |

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| | <p>things. Especially after you overhear her side call. Delilah knows Ned is still in the woods, although i think she had no idea that his son is dead. In any case, she is trying to keep Ned's existence in the woods a complete secret because she considers him a friend and knows that he is just running from problems like everyone that goes there.</p> <p>The side call you overhear happens when the comm lines are cut. She is talking with Ned, reassuring him that you. Henry, has no idea that Ned lives in these woods.</p> <p>The Wapiti Station is a research camp, nothing mysterious or conspiratorial. Delilah knows it's there and it's abandoned until august and she's simply leading you on a goose chase to cover for Ned. The camp is normally occupied by a meteorologist, a seismologist and a geologist, whose jobs are to keep tabs on the natural habitat. That's evident by the monitoring equipment you find. It's common for forests to be monitored as it's an fast way to find changes that could have negative or disastrous effects on the ecosystem.</p> <p>Ned is spying on you because he is anxious since you saw him near your tower. He has no idea that all you ever saw was a shadowy figure and could never recognize him. Ned also planted that "untapped" walkie-talkie at the request of Delilah(who conveniently asked you to stay in your tower all day), just another way to breed paranoia in you and keep Ned hidden. Also, Delilah has worked with radio technology for 13 years. Obviously, she is aware that walkies cannot be tapped, they are not telephones. They operate within a few wavelenghts, and any walkie that can tap that specific channel in the area can also listen in. She says nothing about that to you however, since it's easier to fool you if you are oblivious.</p> <p>Ned also writes the "documents" and transcripts you find, with the help of Delilah, in order to set you on the wrong path. He planted the "evidence" in the research camp when Delilah conveniently made you hike across the whole map to get the axe, giving him plenty of time.</p> <p>After you find the kid's body, Delilah's shock is completely genuine in my opinion. However, now she has a dillema. If she calls the cops she will have to discuss Ned, and as such could be considered an accomplice which could land her in jail, or at least lose her job since she actively and expressly kept the kid's visit to the forest a secret. Furthermore, even though she has lied about almost everything, i don't see her as a villain. In the end, she feels guilty both about the kid and about lying to you. She never intended to lie to you on such a scale. You simply were too inquisitive and you happened to glimpse Ned and overhear the side call. She felt forced to make all the nonsense up to hide Ned. Finally, she decides that meeting you in person is too much to handle right now which is quite understandable given the circumstances.</p> <p>You leave that place thinking that all hell broke loose. She left knowing that everything you experienced was carefully crafted by herself and Ned. Sadly, the summer you spent together was not an experience you shared. She just couldn't think of what to say to you in the end. And, much like the way you and her ended up in that forest, she left so as to run away from her problems.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.16 | And why Ned fire the geologists camp so? | | | |
| 8.2.17 | To block you from searching any further and maybe realize you are being fooled? The threats with the recordings where it seems you and Delilah started | | | |

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| | the fire are mostly a way to avoid police investigations. You are less likely to report it if you think you'll get in trouble with evidence pointing at you. | | | |
| 8.2.18 | <p>Nice interpretation Kamenos.</p> <p>I was thinking the same but with Delilah knowing also about the kid's body. Without her knowing about that, it's fitting better. But I have one question then:</p> <p>If she was knowing and talking to Ned... Where's the kid for her? I mean, Ned's his father. And the kid and her got along well. So how Ned was fooling her about the kid, if they were "friends"?</p> <p>When you tell D. the kid was dead, she puke all her wrath to his father, blaming him for the dead without knowing anything. Maybe Ned was really fooling her about the kid too, like the kid was with him or something...</p> <p>What do you think guys?</p> | | | |
| 8.2.19 | Delilah always said that Ned was not a good father. She might have been thinking that the kid was back home at school. We never hear about a mother in the picture, but that's no reason to assume there isn't someone who could care for him if his awful father decided to be a hermit. Maybe Delilah was glad that his father decided to distance himself since he only made his kid's life miserable. That's my opinion though, maybe Delilah did know of the kid's death from the start. Not a very fulfilling thought though. | | | |
| 8.2.20 | I was fine with the ending and am glad it didn't get tied up into a happy little package with a bow on top. The characters are two life weary people in thier 40's and understand there are no black and white answers. I was also struck with the symbolism of everything burning up in the end and the idea of fire ecology. Fire being both death and a catalyst of life in a forest seemed analogous to the situation they had just been through forcing them to stop hiding from their lives and move on. | | | |
| 8.2.21 | What's wrong with the ending? You either choose to go to your wife or kill yourself. | | | |
| 8.2.22 | I seriously do not recall any kind of "kill yourself" option. | | | |
| 8.2.23 | I think he's talking about what you choose in your head what happened after, although I think there's no way Henry killed himself, it's more likley he would try to track her down since I think she even told him where she was going after all this or where she lived or something then Henry ever committing suicide especially after destressing and thinking everything through on this crazy adventure | | | |
| 8.2.24 | Hnnh... I'm not convinced Henry would track Delilah down outside of a token effort, in my playthrough she seemed... difinitive in her position about their relationship. Multiple interpretations are possible, but the two hooking up seems unlikely and Henry allowing that to color his worldfview in a permanently negative way seems unlikely to me as well. But, I'm an idealist, so I tend to lean towards the brighter of the available options. | | | |
| 8.2.25 | I don't know in my playthrough they seemed pretty close but then again I did all | | | |

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| | of the nice guy options towards her and tried to get close and it's just my view | | | |
| 8.2.26 | <p>>Why didn't we ever get to see Delilah Well, you don't see anyone's face, and this was a deliberate choice by the devs. Honestly her running away makes sense for her character, as she tends to run away from her problems all the time. It makes for a bittersweet ending, but I quite like it.</p> <p>>Stuff about Ned Honestly it's most likely half protecting his secret half messing with someone because he's bored.</p> <p>>How did the elk die Bears? IDK.</p> <p>>What is Delilah talking about Could be anything, she could be talking about a mutual friend of her and another lookout. From what the devs have indicated the intent wasn't to support a 'she was lying to him the whole time' theory.</p> <p>>The cordoned off area It was for research, the exact nature isn't 100% clear. At the entrance is a notice saying when they would be conducting their research and the game takes place when they're away.</p> <p>>how does Ned know Delilah has a boyfriend stil Possibly monitored her calls to him? Or she might have told another lookout</p> <p>>why does Henry have practically no reaction to seeing that? He asks her about it, she denis it. I can't recall if it's an optional part of the coversation tree or if it's scripted to always be mentioned, but it does come up.</p> | | | |
| 8.2.27 | I only played the game once and chose all the options that basically gave Delilah the cold shoulder. I never even said anything about the wife or reveal anything about myself. Yet the game tried so hard to get me to flirt with her. What the hell? Seriously, every single time I had an option to respond I kept thinking to myself "why won't this woman stop coming on to me if I'm not being responsive?" At the end of the game, Delilah even said something like "I never got you to open up" and we went our separate ways. Reading this thread I assume others just took the path the writers obviously wanted you to take and were disappointed when it didn't pan out. I think taking either approach sucks since it all leads to nothing anyway. I could have done without the ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥ story and just explored the game. Change Delilah to a boss who actually sent you there on purpose and your mission is to solve a mystery since the beginning (maybe lots of reports of disappearing bodies, idk), and you've got a much better story line. | | | |
| 8.2.28 | I didn't reveal too many things about me too, but Delilah is so persistent during the game. | | | |
| 8.2.29 | I always wish to see Delilah, but she never shows up. Maybe this is just like a pity in Henry as well in ours. | | | |
| 9.1 | Am I the only one? Am I the only one who miss Delilah and who cried at the end?:/ | | | |

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| 9.1.1 | Nah, not the only one. She had a quality about her. I wouldn't be sad if they made another game with her. | | | |
| 9.1.2 | The ending just made me sad. Delilah is kind of messed up. She flirted a lot with Henry but it was really just out of loneliness and boredom. She has no intention of ever meeting up with him in the outside world. | | | |
| 9.2 | In the end, Whats the point? I just finished the game, got all the achievements, I found all the items, collected all the notes, read all the letters, picked up the turtle to take home with me, collected all the information and letters. it all goes up in flames. Nothing was said, and nothing added to the ending, all the information and everything I collected all went up in fire at the end. Even as the forest was burning down, it still let u take everything from Neds hut. So what was the point in collecting all that stuff? | | | |
| 9.2.1 | Hmmmmm. Maybe a metaphor for Julia's Alzimeirs? The fire slowly spread and in time not even memories are left? I am having some damn good cider at the moment. | | | |
| 11.1 | OT: Do jobs like that exist? Are there really summer jobs like that? Where you don't have to have any real firefighting training beforehand? I soooooo much would want to go. That would f***ing suit me. :D | | | |
| 11.1.2 | Yep! They're definitely less common now than they were in the 80s (or even earlier) but the USFS does still staff some fire lookouts. You're not a firefighter just a, well, lookout. You look. Watch, if you will. Philip Connors has done this every summer for years and recently wrote a book about it, which I think we all read as reference as we were starting on the game. It's interesting, highly recommend it! http://www.amazon.ca/Fire-Season-Field-Wilderness-Lookout/dp/0061859370 | | | |
| 11.1.3 | Its like being a neighborhood watchman apparently. You just call other people. Lots of this in the midwest and Canada | | | |
| 11.1.4 | Wow, thank you for the hints! I'm gonna look into it. In fact, I'm already browsing through the book (it's available for the kindle). I'm not from the US, but maybe there is even a chance to get an H-2B visa for this. I am currently studying to become an English teacher so it could count as an internship in an English speaking country as well. A man can dream! ;) | | | |
| 11.1.5 | There used to be 140 or so fire watch lookout in BC. Recently, they built lightning-strike detectors all over, so the need for lookouts was nearly eliminated. They say the best man-made fire reports come from the people who started the fire. And so, they have since closed all the lookout in BC. Alberta still operates them though. | | | |
| 12.1 | Firewatch 2 ? Do you want a Firewatch 2 that explains what happend to the other outlook ?write a comment with idears for the developers ! | | | |

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| 12.1.1 | <p>would be cool!! In Firewatch 2, you meet up with deliah and go thru some days of helping campers, helping animals, some problems and of course a few forest fires.</p> <p>After that, You and deliah should go back to your tower in the first game, but you find a huge problem. the whole forest should have burned down, but there is 1 big field that survived. and there are people living there who are doing stuff with chemicals and stuff. I don't know yet</p> | | | |
| 12.1.4 | <p>There's no reason for it to have a sequel. It's just the story between Henry and Delilah covering about their complicated lives and upfront of something in the woods. Kinda feels lame that there wasn't any</p> | | | |
| 12.1.5 | <p>Yeah thats why I wanted a sequel for a real and good ending and maybe cleare some things up that you noticed all around the story.</p> | | | |
| 12.1.9 | <p>I'd love a prequel of Delilah's story, where you get to make the choices that shaped her for Firewatch. Gives some people a way to give her more of a backstory, but doing it in such a way that feels meaningful to you.</p> | | | |
| 12.1.1 0 | <p>oooh yea :D or maybe the story could be the next year, evolving around Delilah instead</p> | | | |
| 12.1.1 1 | <p>I think there should be a prequel . It would follow dellilah and how she got her job. It will end when she says the begining call to Henrys tower.</p> | | | |
| 14.1 | <p>I want way more from this game I love the absolute hell out of this game, and its a shame that you added all this new dialogue and everything, for the absolute same ending, I think there should be multiple endings way more conversations, way more quests, etc I want a different ending, I was thinking about coming back for the voice lines and stuff, but I was like, ah, well I know how the game ends and if all of this new dialogue they added, not really a point in going back is there? I mean, Yes I understand the game and yes I understand the plot, but I want to sink way more time into this game for something different you know?</p> | | | |
| 14.1.2 | <p>Well...according to the producer, this independent game is actually a "First Person Narrative Exploration Game", in other words, it's like an "interactive movie", which indicates that this game only has one ending just like any independent films.</p> <p>The right of making choices is an indispenible element of any kinds of games because by giving such right to the gamers can easily create the interactivity of the game. The more choices you can make, the more consequences of each choice the game has, and then the more illusion of "infinite possibilities" can be planted into the gamers brain. But creating hugh amounts of different storylines requires massive time, money and resources, which are not quite affordable to such independent game producers. After all, they are unlike big game companies such as Ubisoft and EA.</p> <p>As a result, the idea of "Fake Choices" were introduced to this game. The right of making choices has given the players much freedom to "MAKE DECISIONS", you can CHOOSE to chat with Delilah the way you like from the beginning to the end, but you can also CHOOSE to become an "austistic" and remain silence until the game ends. It's true that how you talk to Delilah will certainly affect the relationship between you and her, but no matter how you choose or how you act won't change the story massively. Even though there is a hidden ending (you can choose to stay in the mountain instead of taking the</p> | | | |

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| | <p>helicopter), there won't be any more plots after that.</p> <p>With all these "Fake Choices" inside the game, the equilibrium between "decisions" and "regulation" is wonderfully achieved. It does not only offer the players the freedom and create the emotional bond between the choices and the player, giving them more anticipation, but also intensifies such impression until the game ends. Most importantly, the production team doesn't even have to make another different storyline. And the cost of perfecting this game is no more than adding a few more choices and dialogues. XD</p> <p>After all, it's just an independent game, and the desire of "wanting to sink way more time into this game for something different" is exactly what the producer wanted from the players XD.</p> <p>Just my own opinion.:</p> | | | |
| 14.1.5 | <p>You can get a warm feeling by making a choice - that's it. You still have to wander around and unlock the next area in the chain. The world is pretty - but dead - the excitement of exploring becomes the drudge of finding the next "key" - and the story stops at those points, and becomes like a boring book that you keep putting down.</p> | | | |
| 14.1.6 | <p>Yep, this is the school example of a game, that was made in a few weeks, to milk the cashcow. They festooned the storepage with their Bafta-awards and whatnot. But it cant hide, that my 12 yrs old nephew made better games than this. Just sad I cant refund it lol. 4½ hours of my life Ill never get back. But be assured, that whatever the Devs make in the future, I will steer clear of it lol.</p> | | | |
| 14.1.1 1 | <p>Yep loved the game but was hoping for more of Life is Strange kind of replays</p> | | | |
| 15.1 | <p>Why do so many people hate the ending? Did I miss something? I thought it was great.</p> <p>No spoilers here, but replies may include them, so watch out if you haven't played the game.</p> <p>I do not understand the hatred for the ending. During my 4.5h playthrough, I felt the story was well connected, well written and brilliantly voice acted.</p> <p>At the end, you learn exactly what happened, how it happened, why it happened. The story ends with a sense of closure and there are no loose ends.</p> <p>So, why the hate? My only theory is that people who are disapointed didn't want to buy a walking sim, which is exactly what i expected the game to be and also why I really enjoyed it (i love waling sims). That's the only theory I have about this.</p> <p>Would love your opinion, especially those who disliked the ending</p> | | | |
| 15.1.1 | <p>Simple, you don't get the woman</p> | | | |
| 15.1.2 | <p>well, i thought it made sense considering that the guy is, you know, married. The ring on his finger sort of gives it away the devs wanted to ensure the player was reminded of that in every scene.</p> | | | |
| 15.1.3 | <p>That's exactly the root of controversy. He's married, but his wife is mentally</p> | | | |

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| | incapable and lives separately either with family or special institution. He is basically a widower with living wife. And he is still young enough to want romance, close relations, even kids maybe. | | | |
| 15.1.4 | <p>I loved it actually, it was definitely not what i was expecting, and it was depressing as hell, but that's what made it great</p> <p>And regarding why people may dislike it, i guess they expected some sort of supernatural unexplained things, or governmental experiments, conspiracies, murder.. etc, and what they get is grounded in reality depressing story.. so i think it is matter of expectation</p> | | | |
| 15.1.5 | <p>I was pretty disappointed how that mystery was solved eventually, but the way you put it by saying it's just grounded in reality makes it seem like a more deliberate decision by the devs. I personally have a thing for weird supernatural stories so I would have loved to see something like that, but I kinda get what they were going for.</p> <p>Idk if I'm forgetting something, but I don't really understand why Ned was spying on them in the first place. Was he just trying to not make them find out about Brian's death?</p> | | | |
| 15.1.6 | Basically what you said at the end. Ned was a coward so he didn't want to deal with Brian's death in public, so he just hid out in the woods and tried to cover Brian's death by leading Henry in the wrong direction. He spied on them to observe their personalities, etc. to come up with new plans to keep Brian's death a secret | | | |
| 15.1.7 | <p>I see! I got this feeling that if you run through the game, you get this sense of dread - that something 'big' is happening . It's easy to miss the fact that in the cabin for 'research' , you are clearly shown that something 'isn't right' with the so called 'conspiracy' - it talks about the fact that 'research subjects' are collared, just like a regular wildlife research. The only issue is the planted evidence. Furthermore, the bleeper is attached to a research collar a bit later in the game... proving once again something is 'not right'</p> <p>If you miss that fact, then you're probably still under the impression a 'huge thing is happening' and the ending could indeed be disapointing. Tough one for the developers, they were trying to be sneaky but not too much, and ended up pleasing only the people that , like myself , go through every single documents veeerrryyyy slowly.</p> | | | |
| 15.1.8 | Because your choice doesn't matter. Simple. | | | |
| 15.1.9 | I suppose i can relate to a lack of closure in the ending, though i respect the storyteller's focus. We found out what happened with Ned and Brian. We do NOT find out what Henry does after these events with regard to his wife. I also felt teased but unsatisfied with regard to relationships with Susan (the wife's sister) and Delilah. And finally, i get that this is a 'walking sim' and i'm cool with that ... but i've only played through once, so i'm kinda left wondering what difference, if any, my choices made along the way? overall thumbs up though, atmospheric, emotional, enjoyed. | | | |
| 15.1.10 | Because people don't really understand the story or/and missed the hint in the story. But i agree the ending is anti-climatic. | | | |

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| 15.2 | <p>On day three, is there anywhere specific to find the turtle or is it just random Also, where to look?</p> <p>By the way, maybe after completing the game, can you go anywhere? Yknow places like Thorofare Basin (or whatever it's called), a place that by the looks of things has no real entrance</p> | | | |
| 15.2.1 | <p>I found turtle by accident, by the same pond where teens were spotted, I was looking for bear tracks</p> <p>There is free roam mode, in which you have access to all tools found through story</p> | | | |
| 15.2.2 | Yeah I really want to see thorofare basin and the rest of the river | | | |
| 15.3 | <p>Delilah Annoying?</p> <p>~Contains Spoilers~ Did anyone else find Delilah hella annoying? Especially since when I told her that I had a wife with early onset dementia, she continued to make flirty remarks towards me. lol like, b!tch.. get off my d!ck and quit being so thirsty. Also, she seemed very nosey and selfish. She persistently asked personal questions regarding my relationship with Julia, and then would switch the conversation to herself. Furthermore, at the end, before you board the helicopter, she basically just leaves you there, doesn't wait, and ends the conversation coldy. Was this intentional on the developers end? Was this game supposed to simulate how a relationship can form between two strangers and then fizzle and end as if nothing occurred? I'm not sure, but either way.. dis bish was annoying.</p> | | | |
| 15.3.1 | That's women for ya.. I found her mysterious and charming.. But that's just me.. | | | |
| 15.3.2 | I was going to agree until I read the teeny-bopper non-word 'hella'. | | | |
| 15.3.3 | OMG "hella" that's like Soooo yesterday.. This one time at band camp... I can't do this.. The end | | | |
| 15.3.4 | Don't get caught up on the word hella; it's just a word I chose to exemplify my feelings towards the character, and I did so for mainly comedic relief. However, regardless of the wording, I still stand by my opinion of not liking this character. Additionally, I don't understand how the game spends the first 10 or so minutes painting an image of how you met and fell in love with your wife, only to spend the rest of the game talking to this woman. I couldn't help but think the entire time that I should be back at home with my wife that has demetia instead of talking to this person who is getting way too personal with me. | | | |
| 15.3.5 | Furthermore, not all women are like Delilah. I'm a woman, and if I was talking to a man that told me he was married to a woman with early onset dementia, I would never proceed forward and begin to flirt with him. That just seems desperate, disrespectful, and overly promiscuous. | | | |
| 15.3.6 | I wanted to see what she looked like! I was hoping they were going to get together after the game. | | | |

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| 15.3.7 | But why would you want them to get together when he had a wife that needed his help? He can't just run away from his problems and ditch his wife when she needs him the most. | | | |
| 15.3.8 | Well personally I submitted her to 24 hour care and it stated she was with her family in Australia. I would hope that my partner would leave me in someone else's care and go on to live their own lives. It's unfair and it may seem cruel, but it's not anyone's fault and it's unfair to chain someone to you if you don't even remember who they are. It would be egotistical of me to expect them to remain faithful to me until death when I didn't even remember them. | | | |
| 16.1 | <p>Replay Value?</p> <p>I heard about openworld - discovery mode but i'm not sure about it. Would you tell me about this game? What can a player do in this game after finishing the base scenario (if there's one)?</p> <p>I love low poly games focused on landscapes so i'd like to get it but i'm low on budget atm so there should be a really good reason for me to not wait until the next sale.</p> <p>Is there some kind of campfire style experience in this game? I honestly don't know much about it.</p> | | | |
| 16.1.1 | You could traverse the open world after you're done with the main narrative in a seperate mode but I can only see that being fun for a couple more hrs (at least that's the way it was for me), so I'd say the most you could get out of the game is 6-8 hrs. I personally don't judge games by the amount of hrs I get from them, but if you feel that said play time warrants the price then I really recommend that you try the game | | | |
| 16.1.2 | No, actually i care about narrative experience MORE than replay value, but since this game and The Long Dark looks so similar in base, i was expecting a mode to walk around and maybe hunt somethings down... i dont know. | | | |
| 16.1.3 | There is no hunting or anything of the sort in firewatch, just walking and climbing | | | |
| 16.1.4 | Well i just got it and finished it 5 mins ago. It was damn worth it. But sure, more content would be fine! | | | |
| 16.1.5 | Glad you've gave it a shot and enjoyed it! While I definitely would've loved to play that game a bit more, I'm not quite sure what they could've added to it to be honest | | | |
| 16.1.6 | <p>I have some games that i played more than 200 hours. And none of them hat the impact that Firewatch did on me.</p> <p>If this game is a pile of ♥♥♥♥, it's a great pile of ♥♥♥♥.</p> | | | |
| 16.1.7 | <p>Do you know i'm the OP of this post, right? First i asked to know if this game worth it, i bought it and it was really worth it.</p> <p>A game doesnt need replayability to be a legend. The Stanley Parable has no replayability (after 19 different ending which takes around 3-4 hours) but it's</p> | | | |

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| | <p>one of the most beautiful games on Steam. Portal 1 has almost no replayability but it's most rated game on Steam (with 98%+ positive reviews). Kholat has no replayability at all, but it's an amazing game.</p> <p>Do you keep watching the same movie after liking one? Or just letting it go for some time until you want to experience it again?</p> <p>This is the same. I don't get paid or i didn't get a free copy.</p> <p>Some games are not just fun toys you can go ahead and play whenever you bored. Some games gives you the feeling of an interactive movie. Fix your perspective on games, and stop blaming people for not thinking the way you think and saying they're getting paid and ♥♥♥♥. That's childish.</p> <p>Originally posted by Felix Steiner: Originally posted by Baycosinus: I have some games that i played more than 200 hours. And none of them hat the impact that Firewatch did on me.</p> <p>If this game is a pile of ♥♥♥♥, it's a great pile of ♥♥♥♥.</p> <p>Then why did you play for 5 hours and quit? If this game was good, you would be well on your way to putting hundreds of hours in, but you aren't. In fact, you are lying. My question is, how much do they pay you to post? Or do you just get a free copy in return for positive press?</p> | | | |
| <p>16.1.8</p> | <p>There is zero replay value, sorry. It's mostly a linear walking simulator gameplay with little to no variety.</p> | | | |
| <p>16.1.9</p> | <p>This game is story-oriented and the only gameplay are walking, take photos and interact with few things.</p> | | | |

Firewatch Prologue Script

- <Boulder, Colorado> 1975
- <You see Julia.>
- She's about your age. Late 20s. Laughing with well-dressed professors and grad students from nearby CU Boulder. You, Henry, are out drinking with your pals. <You approach her.>
- You are drunk. <"So...what's your, you know, major?">

You slur the word major and it smells like Coors. You give an awkward smile. "Evolutionary Biology," she says. "And I'm a professor." "...Cool." You reply. "What's yours?" she asks. She sniffs the air. <"Toxicology?">

"Was that a burn?" you ask. She says definitely. Worried she hurt your feelings, she asks if you want to split a cheeseburger. <One week later you are Julia's boyfriend.>
- You are drunk. <"You...You're pretty.">

"YOU'RE pretty," she says, coolly. You are not. You are a future hangover. "What," you reply, confused. "Someone should buy you a cheeseburger," she says. <She flags down a waiter and one week later you are Julia's boyfriend.>
- GAME PLAY - LIFT SCENE
- You date for over a year. <She drives you absolutely nuts. It's great.>
- You move in. You share an apartment near the school with a view of the mountains. You two drink beers out on the deck. You drink beer just about anywhere. <Life is good.>
- <Julia wants to get a dog.>
- There's a scruffy, undersized Beagle. Julia is in love. She wants to bring it with her to class. There's also an intimidating but gentle-eyed German Shepherd. Nothing bad could happen to Julia while walking this dog. It's bad ass. <You pick up the Beagle and she names him Bucket.>

Bucket's a good dog and a week later you've totally forgotten about the other one. Julia loves him. <You love him too.>

- There's a scruffy, undersized Beagle. Julia is in love. She wants to bring it with her to class. There's also an intimidating but gentle-eyed German Shepherd. Nothing bad could happen to Julia while walking this dog. It's bad ass.

Mayhem's an excellent dog. He loves wrestling with you in the park and goes with Julia on her runs. Even though he's too big to bring to school, Julia loves him all the same. <Mayhem is a friend, child, and pet all rolled into one.>

- 1979 You talk out on the deck. It's summer. 9.30pm and the heat still radiates off the high desert. <"What do you think about kids?" she asks.>
- "Kids...? They're not very smart. Or good at much." "I'm saying if you and I have some. A couple of little idiots." <That would be pretty good.>
"In that case, we should probably get married." "Yeah, I would like that," you say. "These kids are going to be screwed up enough. It's probably for the best that their parents are hitched." <You say she's absolutely right.>
- "Kids...? They're not very smart. Or good at much." "I'm saying if you and I have some. A couple of little idiots." <One day. Why rush?>
She looks away, out towards the mountains. "We have plenty of time, right?" "Speak for yourself, mister." <"Don't worry," you assure her.>
You tell her she has the body of an undergrad. "My ovaries didn't get the memo," she says, laughing it off. <"One day, okay?">
"Okay, one day," she says. <Six months later you get engaged while lying in bed on a Sunday morning.>

- GAME PLAY - THOROFARE TRAILHEAD

- 1980 It's a Thursday night and Julia is four hours late. She doesn't call.
You're worried and getting angrier by the minute. <She walks in after you've gone to bed.>
- She's not quite drunk but she's clearly been having a fun time. You fight when she gets between the sheets. <You get mad.>
You call her an inconsiderate asshole. She tells you to fuck yourself and to not be such a baby. You call her selfish. <She knows you mean it and it hurts her feelings.>
- She's not quite drunk but she's clearly been having a fun time. You fight when she gets between the sheets. <You ignore her.>
You don't touch each other all night. The next day you feel guilty for being so angry and ask her about her evening. She says it was great. You hold onto a tiny pill of resentment. <You make some coffee and go to work.>
- 1981 Julia still likes to draw. She draws plants from her research. She draws the places you go. She draws you. <You pose and flex like He-Man.>
<You look awesome.>
- 1981 Julia still likes to draw. She draws plants from her research. She draws the places you go. She draws you. <You frolic like a Victoria's Secret Model.>
<Very nice.>
- GAME PLAY - HIKING SPACE BAR JUMP
- 1982 <During the summers, you and Julia enjoy walking Mayhem at night.>
There's a festival in town. It brings in folks from far away places.
<One of them tries to mug you with a knife.>
Mayhem runs away. "May - mi - moo - FUCK - d...d...dog!" Julia yells. She gets flustered and has trouble speaking when she is

stressed. You confront the attacker. <You scare him away.>

<You beat his goddamn face in.>

<You scare him away.> <You reach into your pocket like
you've got a gun and threaten to kill him. You manage to
scare all three of you. He runs away.>

<You beat his goddamn face in.> Your arm gets cut up but you
beat the guy to a pulp. You don't feel very tough. You cry
your eyes out before the cops show up. Julia asks to take a
different path from that day forward. You say okay. You
don't want to go that way either. <From then on you walk
by the river.>

- 1982 <During the summers, you and Julia enjoy walking Bucket at night.>

There's a festival in town. It brings in folks from far away places.

<One of them tries to mug you with a knife.>

Bucket gets kicked. "B - bi - bah - FUCK - d...d...dog!" Julia yells.

She gets flustered and has trouble speaking when she is stressed.

You confront the attacker. <You scare him away.><You beat his
goddamn face in.>

<You scare him away.> <You reach into your pocket like
you've got a gun and threaten to kill him. You manage to
scare all three of you. He runs away.>

<You beat his goddamn face in.> Your arm gets cut up but you
beat the guy to a pulp. You don't feel very tough. You cry
your eyes out before the cops show up. Julia asks to take a
different path from that day forward. You say okay. You
don't want to go that way either. <From then on you walk
by the river.>

- 1984 <Plans to have kids get waylaid by work.>

- Julia gets offered a job at Yale. Yale is in Connecticut, two thousand miles away. It's a great job: associate department chair. She wants to move. You absolutely do not. <Convince her not to take the job.> <Agree if she commutes back and forth.>
 - <Convince her not to take the job.> You tell her that this means you two won't have a family. She says that's bullshit. (She's totally right.) She asks if her taking the job means you won't come with her. You say yes. Again, bullshit. <But she decides not to take it.> <Agree if she commutes back and forth.> You ask her if she'll commute back and forth. You don't want to move to Connecticut. She says that'll be hard, but she'll do it if you won't move. You tell her not to pass it up if it's what she wants. <She agrees. She flies back to Boulder three times each semester.>
- 1985 Julia is sent home from Yale/ asked to leave Boulder on paid leave after having "an episode". She lost it on a colleague for borrowing books that were important to her research. <She didn't remember she had happily loaned them to him just two days prior.>
- She was found crying in the stairwell. <You say that maybe you guys should talk to someone about it.> <You make macaroni and drink wine and try to forget about it.>
 - <You say that maybe you guys should talk to someone about it.> After seeing multiple doctors and having many tests, they are worried that Julia might be suffering from early onset dementia. She is 41. <You both decide to keep it a secret for now.> <You make macaroni and drink wine and try to forget about it.> It works. <You watch Dallas on TV and sleep together on the couch.>
- GAME PLAY - JOURNAL DRAWING OF HENRY HE-MAN/VICTORIA'S SECRET MODEL CHOICE SHOWN

- Two choices based on earlier dog decision:

Bucket is getting older. Julia comments that it's kind of nice because he gets in less trouble around the house. <A week later, she goes back to the university.>

Mayhem is getting older. He's got silver hair down his back and slows down at night. You and Julia walk him to the bar to see your friends and it feels like nothing has changed. <A week later, she goes back to the university.>

- 1987 Julia's affliction gets worse. She can't remember things in class. Her research is in shambles. She drives her car to the next town over, for not particular reason, and has to be brought home by the police. She is devastated. <She is sent home on permanent medical leave.>
- Some days you get the Julia who calls you a dope and your unborn children little idiots. Other days you get a stranger. <She pulls you into bed to make love. After five minutes she goes into a panic believing her dad is at the door.>
- You tell her family. They are crushed and begin to make trips to and from their home in Australia to visit her. For a while friends come by with little things to brighten the day. <She gets worse.>
- 1988 Yo spend your days following Julia around the house. You count the seconds between the two weekly visits from Daniel, the nurse. He suggests that Julia could live somewhere else. Somewhere with 24-hour care. A home. It sits with your for a couple of months. <You decide to move her into a full-time care facility.> <You are determined to take care of her by yourself.>
- GAME PLAY - ON THE TRAIL - SEE STAG
- <You decide to move her into a full-time care facility.>

Her family agrees with your decision. You find a fantastic place in Boulder and move her there. You see her every day. <Then every other day.>

You go out to the bar with your old friends. It's not the same. You get the feeling that every wife tells her husband "If you ever put me in a home like Henry did, I will cut your balls off." <You slowly decide to not see your old friends that much.>

1989 Julia's sister Susan moves to Boulder to be close to her. She visits her everyday. You go with her some of the time. Susan buys you an old typewriter and urges you to use it if you won't see a therapist. You won't. <You've always really liked Susan.>

Months go by. Bucket dies. Julia doesn't remember him when you tell her. Sometimes it takes her a minute, to lock in on you. In the back of your mind you believe it's because you see her less and less. And seeing her less and less makes her forget you more. You think. <Summer is coming and you see an ad in the paper for a job.>

<You take it.>

- <You are determined to take care of her by yourself.>

It is impossibly hard. The worst is when you get mad at her, like when she tries to cook her own food. <You can't do anything without her and she can't do anything without you.>

When she goes to sleep you stay up for a few hours. Drinking on the deck. Watching baseball in the summer, college basketball in the winter. <Drinking then too.>

You start going out after you put her to bed. The first time you do it you worry about her getting up and walking around while you're gone. <You put a chain in front of the bedroom door.> <You trust that she sleeps like a rock.>

<You put a chain in front of the bedroom door.> [AND <You trust that she sleeps like a rock.>] You go to the same bar at the boring end of Pearl St. It's nice there. Over time you tell Sheila, the bartender, everything. It's a huge weight off. You're home and in bed by 1am a couple of nights a week. <You look forward to those nights.>

1989 One night you are stopped at a DUI checkpoint. You blow a .10 and are taken to jail for the night. <You consider trying to hide it but you tell your sister-in-law, Susan.>

Julia's parents take the next plane from Australia. They can't believe the state your house is in. Then they tell you Julia is coming to live with them. You don't argue. You say you'll visit soon. A few weeks go by. <Summer is coming and you see an ad in the paper for a job.>


<You take it.>

Firewatch Prologue Decision Tree

Appendix 3: The Novelist Steam Comments

| Ref. | Post Comments | My Comments |
|-------|---|--|
| 1.1 | <p>What a lovely game *spoilers* *spoilers for the ending and the rest of the game*</p> <p>Had so much fun with this game. I know it's not very long but still, I played it in one sitting. I was pleasantly surprised that everyone ended the game happy. Dan became a professor and his novel was a great success and he had a long and happy career (if I'd known that was going to happen I would have probably passed on the job and let Linda join the art group...) Linda felt alone in making her career work but ultimately their marriage was stronger than ever and they lived the rest of their life like honeymooners. I was really worried about Tommy but though he never understood why we had to move, he grew up to have a successful art career and a happy family of his own. Yay! I felt like I neglected Tommy a lot during the game, so I was happy that he came through alright. I put him first every now and then but so often what he wanted was in huge conflict with some much more important things (an air show vs Linda's grandmother's funeral after she specifically told Dan she needed him to be there for her? Sorry Tommy but just...no. not even close).</p> <p>I loved how the story was told, I loved how there were times when I really wanted to back someone but what they needed was just so harmful in one way or the other. Like I really wanted Dan's book to be a successful but I couldn't let him continue to abuse drink to make that work for him. If he couldn't write sober he shouldn't be writing. And knowing now that I led him into a successful career as a writer, I'm glad I made the call.</p> <p>I was curious about the messages that appeared at night from previous people who stayed at the house. They made me very curious but I'm not sure how I ultimately felt about them....and I wondered if that was exactly what the designer was going for? More questions and an added sense of mystery about the entity you were playing?</p> <p>Overall a great game!</p> | Deep engagement here – they care about the characters. |
| 1.1.1 | <p>Kent [developer] 17 Nov, 2018 @ 1:31pm Thanks for the thoughtful write-up! I'm so glad you had this experience -- it's exactly what I designed for. Difficult decisions, balancing needs over time, feeling empathy for the characters ...</p> <p>To answer your question about the night time chapters, those were intended to</p> | Developer Kent Hudson – rather odd having |

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| | <p>provide a bit of a mysterious history to the house. They were supposed to be a bit ambiguous, in that two of the stories leave it open what happened. The main goal was just to show that things like the events of this game have been going on in the house for a long time, and the Kaplans are just the latest group to fall under its sway. Just a little something extra to think about, is all.</p> <p>Anyway, thanks again for sharing your thoughts. I love reading players' stories!</p> | <p>him comment directly, but he is an independent developer who did everything on TN.</p> |
| <p>1.2</p> | <p>Did I miss something? (Or a lot of somethings??) Sooo... did K---- actually kill herself? I'm assuming so since I ended up not finding any more of her journal entries after she said she chose her path. Or is it different per playthrough? Maybe I'm just not remembering correctly because I played the first half of the game a few months ago and then picked this back up... Was K---- Linda's grandmother??</p> <p>And who the heck was Roger? What was that all about? Idk maybe I should re-play the game all at the same time lol.</p> <p>Overall. I liked my endings!! Dan's career kinda sucked, but Tommy excelled in his life and became very well loved and successful, and Dan and Linda's love was very deep and genuine. I appreciated that very much! I actually liked Linda, despite what everyone else said...</p> <p>Did anyone else notice all the playtesters seemed to be male??.... That peeved me a little. A bit more female insight might've helped. I dunno.</p> | <p>Engagement.</p> |
| <p>1.2. 1</p> | <p>Kent [developer] 24 Feb, 2016 @ 11:15pm To answer your first question, there are 3 different periods of the house's backstory that you find during the nighttime chapters, and the 2nd and 3rd have intentionally ambiguous endings. So you didn't miss anything; the intent (regardless of whether or not it actually worked) was for people to kinda finish the stories in their heads and figure out what they wanted to happen.</p> <p>As for the predominance of male playtesters, you're unfortunately correct. I wish there was more I could have done, but almost all of the playtesters were game developers, and this is still -- again, unfortunately -- a male-dominated industry.</p> <p>I can definitely say, however, that I tried to weigh feedback more heavily from female playtesters because they of course have a different experience and can spot problematic issues that guys might not even know are there. I know that Linda isn't a perfect character -- and none of them were intended to be -- but she got a lot more independent and less stereotypical due to feedback from female testers.</p> | |

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| | <p>So, certainly not as good as it could be, but I did try to make up for it in listening more closely to female perspectives and fixing things when they rightly called me on problematic issues.</p> <p>And I'm trying to be more proactive about the things I've learned in the 3 years since creating the characters for The Novelist. For one, our next game (to be announced soon) has a female protagonist who is awesome without being sexualized or skimpily dressed. :)</p> | |
| 1.2. 2 | <p>As a female, I didn't like Linda as much. I see in some of the forum threads that others felt this as well. That she was too selfish. I see how you tried to make her seem independant but the selfishness came from her trying to put so much focus on restarting her career when her husband's was in trouble. I felt she should have done everything to help Dan get his life as a writer back on track and after the book was done, then they could concentrate on her career. At least that is how my marriage is.</p> <p>If Dan had been floundering for years it should have been made more apparent that she had lost confidence in him and felt she had waited long enough. But he had a contract with a publisher so he couldn't have been that far down in the dumps. Almost all her decisions were pulling him away from his writing instead of helping him. I get that maybe she had lost a lot of her own ambitions to help his but was this really the time? We are only talking about the summer that he needed to finish the novel. Not years more. He isn't George R. R. Martin....Of course if he was then she should lock him in their room (not the office, he needs a bathroom), cut a hole in the door for food, and only give him food when he completed a chapter.</p> | Deep engagement and schema? |
| 1.3 | <p>Just Finished It</p> <p>First off, this is a great game and I enjoyed it a lot. I really felt for the characters and it was especially hard letting Tommy down. But at the same time it felt like it was Dan against the world. Like the only way for Linda and Tommy to be happy was for Dan to give up everything. If Dan wasn't there to hold Linda's hand or build Tommy's car their respective relationships would fall apart.</p> <p>Somehow I ended up with a good ending. Tommy became popular (but not a jerk) and was a successful graphic novelist, Linda painted or something, Dan's book was an American classic, and he and Linda's marriage was an endless honeymoon. I think the bourbon was the secret to the good ending. Just enough to get Dan's writing passion going, but stop before the family goes to . Oh and don't go to grandma Jo's funeral, the book signing is more important.</p> | |
| 1.3. 1 | <p>Yeah, I go the endless honeymoon bit, but Dan's book was a flop and Tommy didn't blossom. I went to the funeral but stuck with the bourbon.</p> | Minor participatory culture 'yeah', and in 1.3.3 'Nope', |

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| | | ultimately just sharing their experiences. |
| 1.3.2 | Just finished it. Tommy was popular and made it big time, Linda painted part-time and her passion for the hobby really grew. Linda and Dan loved each other like an endless honeymoon but Dan's book never made it, he bounced between jobs and gave up on his career and dreams. Bit miffed about that and I do agree that it seemed to be a case of lose your wife and kid or give up everything. | |
| 1.3.3 | Nope, I ended with Dan's book being a classic and having a great career as a professor. Linda's painting career took off. Tommy adjusted and was a successful comic book writer and had a family of his own. I thought I messed it up because the first few nights I didn't know how to add the compromise + the main decision but it turned out well anyway. And their marriage was strong in the future. So for success, mainly did Dan with alternating compromises with the others except for a few key points like Dan attending the funeral, Tommy's reading lessons and getting Dan off of drinking (running shoes). | |
| 2.1 | SPOILER Question Does your final choice change the final 3 outcomes? on mine, i chose the envelope and tommy settled in to his school, but dan and linda got a divorce. If i picked a different ending would it of been different? | |
| 2.1.1 | Absolutely. In mine, they stayed, he and Linda lived like honeymooners for the rest of their lives. I'm fairly certain they would have stayed together even if he took the job. | |
| 2.1.2 | I chose the envelope and the last two vignettes were Dan and Linda in bed, feeling their relationship had gotten stronger over the summer and the kid 'coming out of his shell' at the new school, so it sounds like your actions prior to the final one decide whether or not the marriage survives the relocation. | |
| 2.1.3 | I chose Tommy's backpack. Linda and Dan lived like honeymooners, as noted above. Though Dan's novel failed and he gave up on writing, his interest in Tommy's schoolwork pushed the kid to thrive in school and become a renowned graphic novelist, succeeding where his father did not. The parents grew old, traveled, and watched their son grow with pride. | |
| 2.1.4 | A complete failure, then. It's nice that you can lose in the game, though. | |
| 2.1.5 | Is there a way to write a successful novel AND not ruin your family in the process? Or is it simply an "either/or" choice? | |
| 2.1.6 | oh man, looks like i got the bad ending then :(i chose tommy's outcome everytime apart from twice and i kinda took it in turns with linda and dan. my logic for dans final outcome was that he would of had a secure job so they wouldnt be stressed out about the next book and having to balance writing | |

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| | with family life and also he wouldn't feel the need to drink, i guess i was wrong :(| |
| 2.1.7 | You can definitely have happy endings for everyone. The main thing you need to do is take advantage of the compromise feature. If you spend the whole game focusing on one person, you'll get an okay or unhappy ending for the other two people. But if you keep it balanced, and use compromises, you can get a happy ending for everyone. | |
| 2.1.8 | I stressed Tommy as well. I played my first playthrough with the mantra: "You bring a child into the world, you take on the responsibility of helping him or her grow." The marriage stayed strong, Tommy grew into a success, and while Dan's writing career never took off, I had him accept the professorship. Providing for your child takes precedence. | |
| 2.1.9 | I chose the envelope, and the game ended with Dan's book as an amazing success. He and Linda did not get a divorce, but did have a loveless marriage; I never liked Linda anyway so I was secretly half-hoping they'd get divorced and Dan would find himself a nice lady who wasn't such a killjoy. Tommy became a comic book artist, which surprised me as I felt I was leaving him out a little too much. Anyone worked out how much weight do the compromises hold in relation to first choices? | Deep engagement and projection into another Possible World. |
| 2.1.10 | The endings to the game are based on the culmination of all your choices throughout the game, but the final decision (professorship vs. family) carries more weight than an average chapter. So it's a combination, really. | |
| 2.1.11 | I thought so, but I mean, is a compromise worth half as much as choosing a resolution? So if I went with Dan's resolution once, then Tommy's compromise twice, would they both be as happy as each other? Great to hear from the dev btw, really enjoyed your game! Thinking about it, if you think revealing that would ruin some of the magic of the game, you don't have to answer. It may spoil it a little if it were so easy to work out the "happiness rating" of characters based on the decisions one has made, I completely understand that :) | |
| 2.1.12 | Hehe, yeah, the system behind the relationships really is just a set of numbers and rules, and I made a very conscious effort not to expose the numbers b/c I felt that would make it a little too mechanical. But basically, the main person you choose gets a boost to their relationship score. The two people who aren't chosen each lose points on their relationship score. Each person loses half the amount that the chosen character gets, meaning that the number of overall points in the system stays the same; you're just reallocating ... happiness, I guess. :-) But a compromise means that that person's relationship score stays the same, instead of going down. Which in effect adds a point of happiness to the system, | |

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| | making the whole family a little better off overall. So if you compromise in every chapter, you're slowly but surely raise their fates together (assuming you spread the love ... if you continually ignore someone w/o choosing them or giving them compromises to at least keep them afloat, they can still get super bummed). | |
| 2.1. 13 | <p>Wow, nice! I'm very "maths-brained" so through the game I was constantly trying to quantify the choices I was making, it's super cool to get a little insight into the way it works behind the scenes. I like that concept, the points staying at a constant level except for the extra boost for making compromises. Gives the player a little reward for it.</p> <p>I must say, you've done a very good job of making a logic-head like myself struggle with moral choices and feel torn between family members. It's not often a game brings such feelings into play, so a huge bravo from me! *clap-clap-clappity-clap*</p> <p>I did notice a tiny bug, so I'll go post about it now. Nothing huge, but you might like to be aware of it nonetheless.</p> | |
| 2.1. 14 | <p>Yeah, I think the way that the system works comes from my background as a systems designer. For my whole career I've always worked on core gameplay stuff: player abilities, interactive objects, AI, game systems, and so on. So I always think of things in very systemic terms.</p> <p>This is the first game where I've ever done writing (or story or characters or music or UI or a bunch of other stuff :-), so the challenge was always, "How do I take this relationship system I've designed and represent it to the player in a way that's emotional and resonant, not just a bunch of numbers and UI?"</p> <p>I'm glad that it paid off in your case. :-)</p> | |
| 2.1. 15 | <p>I think I got a pretty good ending. Dan didn't get a professorship, but his book sold well and he published well-received books for the rest of his life. Dan and Linda had a lovely marriage and traveled the world, and Tommy became a successful graphic novel artist. So I think it's safe to say I'm READY FOR MARRIAGE.</p> <p>(Except not really)</p> | |
| 2.1. 16 | <p>Heh, that is definitely one of the happier possible endings. Nice work balancing the compromises!</p> | |
| 2.1. 17 | <p>All of my endings were happy. Dan didn't take the job but his novel was good and he went on to become a respected author and successful lecturer. Allowing Linda to paint and Tommy to stay in the same school meant they were happy also. I basically weighed each decision's significance. Like going to the funeral of Linda's grandmother wasn't nearly as important as having a good chapter to present at a reading.</p> | |
| 2.1. 18 | <p>Reading other people's feelings about the significance of events has been quite revealing in terms of how people differ! I was adamant that I had to go to the funeral, because supporting your partner through difficult times like that is a</p> | |

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| | <p>huge part of a healthy relationship.</p> <p>In the end, Dan took the job and became one of the most respected novellists and lecturers in the country. Linda had to turn down her opportunity, but made a success out of her career nonetheless and their marriage was a long and happy one where they lived like honeymooners for ever more. Tommy, on the other hand, turned into a bit of a hopeless case: no friends, bad jobs, the works.</p> <p>I'm a professional writer and one of the things I write about for a living is how to have healthy relationships; I'm not a parent, though, and I have no desire to be (not to mention I reckon I'd be pretty dreadful at it). So I suppose it's not really surprising that that's how my ending came out ;-)</p> | |
| 2.2 | <p>Not too Fond of Linda (Spoilers)</p> <p>I spent most of the game catering to Linda and Tommy, only picking Dan's choice twice, the very beginning where I thought they needed the money/needed to keep his job and once when they went on a Bonfire in the woods (which I thought was supposed to be good for the whole family but Linda was a big butt about it). Dan in my game spent so much time trying for her, even getting her own art show. And did as best for the kid as I could but unfortunately mostly compromised since a lot of things with Linda are once in a life time things. Or once in a this time things.</p> <p>But in the end, I chose to take the job and here is why: This is a REAL job that Dan would actually enjoy. It would give them a good living life, move to an good area where there is a COLLEGE. Tommy would have to move schools, but I moved like 5 times and switched schools accordingly so I knew he'd be fine in the end. With all this extra time working a normal job with not only Vacations, but the ENTIRE SUMMER OFF, he'd be able to help his kid get caught up with school and Linda could also be there.</p> <p>BUT, that's not what really happened. In the end, Linda and Dan were very happy and lived like honemooners and etc, Dan was happy with his new job, Tommy didn't amount to anything in life and sorta drifted off into forgettable jobs. Sounds decent to fine except for Tommy, but then Linda said the thing. She said that Dan really never supported her Art and her career. Because if we stayed she would have her Art Charity thing, which would become her full time job, forcing Dan to put himself into a normal job COMPLETELY obliterating his dream job/whole career in writing. She literally wanted his dream to die simply so she can pursue hers at full time, even at the cost of her son's education no less. She said "Oh well dan could tutor him after work, or I could work part time or whatever to help out, but either way Dan has to get a real job". Not those exact words but the gist of it.</p> <p>Now here's where I have issue. Dan has been putting his job on the line, so she can have her dream. I didn't like his job originally, but regardless he put so much effort into helping her realize her dream again. And then all of a sudden because he wanted to move his family to a better life, she decides he doesn't support her at all. In a town with a COLLEGE where arts usually flourish. There wasn't a charity Art thing, but there would be others at the very least. But because it wasn't that ONE art thing, she was upset, she didn't feel supported,</p> | Deep engagement but also drawing on real world experience – this mattered to the participants. |

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| | <p>because she wanted HIM to completely give up on his dream and support the family so she can persue art full time.</p> <p>Now I can understand if things are different behind the scenes, but that's the problem. I get attached to what I see, I dont' see dan apparently "locked away" in his room for the entire day. I see him spending time with his family for her schedule, giving up on his work, basically being done with work to support his family, especially with the death in the family. So I don't see this selfish man that apparently is there. In my game, he was extremely supportive though at times he would indulge in himself for his actual job, something that brings him to drinking because of depression and stress. But I don't see any real support for Dan, except for when she gets him off drinking. But that's about it. I mean I don't know the entire reason behind their moving to his house, maybe it was just for him, but Linda made it seem it was more for her and Tommy.</p> <p>Eithe rway it was a good game, but I just feel so salty towards Linda for saying Dan didn't support her dream. Especially since she winds up going back into Painting anyway.</p> | |
| 2.2.1 | <p>Yeah, I found Linda to be incredibly difficult and selfish as well.</p> <p>I made similar choices, but I had Dan turn down the professorship to tutor Tommy.</p> <p>He & Linda live happily ever after (romantically), Tommy becomes a famous graphic novelist (cool synergy of the two parent's influences), but Dan looks back and sees his life as a failure.</p> <p>Really awesome game, however. It made me think for sure.</p> | |
| 2.2.2 | <p>I'm pretty sure that's basically the right "family" choice you're supposed to make. But it doesn't like, show the fact that having a proffessor job is actually a really good job to support family, and professors have a lot of extra time for holidays and etc. He should have still been able to tutor Tommy during his off hours, after all he is a professor. Or maybe Linda could have tutor'd him? What's Linda doing with her life that's so important she can't help her own child? Geeze. Haha.</p> | |
| 2.2.3 | <p>It really stuck me that Linda wanted to set family dinners at a specific time every night. I ended up granting that choice, but in a mechanical grating sort of way. I didn't think it was reasonable, but I was balancing choices numerically. The numbers said that was the next one.</p> <p>I regretted it. Dan seemed to have pretty good ideas about what he needed (although I'm not sure about the drinking), but Linda was never inclined to ASK what Dan needed. Well, eating dinner at the same time every night inflicted a terminal wound to his writing, in a way that he clearly knew going in it was likely to do.</p> | |
| 2.2.4 | <p>Personally I hated Dan's Job. He just didn't seem that good of a writer to begin with which is why I thought the proffessor job was an amazing catch.</p> | |

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| | <p>But yes, it was mostly just "Hey Dan, yeah stop working, and do these things. Also your son wants to do this, but do this for me FIRST.</p> | |
| 2.2.5 | <p>There is a difference between supporting a family and being there for a family. So, I opted to not take the job. I knew Linda had a decent income working part-time after nuturing her art and that Dan would get part-time jobs as well to help the family live day to day. All that mattered now was making sure Tommy was not relegated to special education because the parents were too busy to care for him..</p> <p>For the whole game, I completely ignored Dan's book. I focused on Linda and Tommy solely because, in the end, all that matters is family. You may not be the richest family but you're together. And what's the point of ruining your child's future just to make yourself happy.</p> | <p>Real life values NOT what we expect in video games – GTA for example allows us to transgress – participants don't all want to transgress (although there are some threads that reference The Shining in relation to this title)</p> |
| 2.2.6 | <p>I know and that's what the game wants you to believe by not taking that Job. BUT if he actually took that job in REAL life, things would be MUCH different than they depicted. He'd be making enough for Linda to find another art venture, he'd have much more time off to spend and help tommy. Like he was going to be a professor. They don't work 24/7 if anything they only have a set block of time that they do work, then he could definitely have helped Tommy while he was off, or even Linda. There was 0% reason to believe that him taking a professor job was going to make it where he had no time with his family. And moving to a college town, there HAS to be other art places for Linda to be happy too.</p> <p>That's the main issue I had with the whole game. It didn't display the choice at the end very well. IF it were ANYTHING else sure, a new book? A Newspaper Job? Something else would have made sense, but a professor? They get weeks off at a time, and at many times work less hours than Tommy would be in school. It's just ridiculous.</p> | |

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| 2.3 | <p>Thank you for this game Just finished it after my first playthrough. To be honest, it might be the first time I play this type of game (except "Gone Home" that I finished and, honestly, didn't really liked...) and I really enjoyed it.</p> <p>I kinda took the "logical methodical gamer" approach instead of just... you know... "feeling" the game. Always took Dan's sidecompromising with Linda and neglecting Tommy (as you might guess, I don't have kids :) So I ended up with a really bad ending :-s</p> <p>One thing is sure : I'll play again, trying to live the story instead of just playing it (Hello story mode !)</p> <p>Anyway, thanks again and congratulations. You sir made a great game.</p> | |
| 2.3. 1 | <p>^ Agreed! I've finished my first playthrough on Stealth mode, and am just about to play through it again. Like Cold Hand, I've also played "Gone Home" and it wasn't what I expected (and not in a good way), but The Novelist really lived up to my expectations!</p> | |
| 2.3. 2 | <p>Wow, thank you both for such kind words! It always means a lot to hear from players who had a good, personal experience with the game. Much appreciated! Hope the second playthroughs live up to your expectations!</p> | |
| 2.3. 3 | <p>I really strived for a balance, but I think it went Tommy > Dan > Linda for the most part. In the end, I got a pretty sad ending for Dan but really great endings for Linda and Tommy. But hey, having a wildly successful/happy kid and a love that endures for the rest of your life totally outweighs giving up writing!</p> <p>Great game, and it deserves more recognition! 🎮</p> | |
| 2.3. 4 | <p>Thanks for saying so! Be sure to spread the word. :)</p> | |
| 2.3. 5 | <p>I know I'm really late to this thread, but I just wanted to also say thanks for this game. I really enjoyed it, and its one of those very few games that stayed in my mind for ages after playing and finishing it. Its very unique and made me really feel those consequences for the choices I made. I'm looking forward to replaying it and trying some of the other choices. Also, I hope to see another similar game in future too ;)</p> | |
| 2.3. 6 | <p>Don't worry about being late, it always means a lot to hear from players. Thanks so much for taking the time to post; I'm glad to hear that the choices and consequences stuck with you. That was my goal! :)</p> | |
| 2.3. 7 | <p>Didn't want to create a new discussion to say the same as the OP.</p> <p>Just wanted to thank you for the great game. It really made me think a lot when choosing one path or another, trying not to leave anyone out, balancing things.</p> <p>Makes one think a lot about real life relationships, even more if you're a parent (which I'm not, but I can guess it's a full time job). I just feel that you've managed to capture incredibly well the emotions behind each decision. I kind</p> | |

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| | <p>of look at my life in a similar fashion to the way the game works, spending some time with those I care and not entirely focusing on myself.</p> <p>Great stuff, congratulations.</p> | |
| 2.3.8 | <p>I just finished. The last decision was the hardest, I admit it. But I chose the same for my own life, and it turned out great as expected, even if it was hard to pass through.</p> <p>Thank you for this game. Really.</p> | |
| 2.3.9 | <p>You're very welcome. It means a lot to hear that the game is still connecting with players and giving them something to think about. Thanks so much for posting.</p> | |
| 2.3.10 | <p>So little thanks? That's not ok. This is a great game and you deserve more praise for it.</p> <p>I tried to balance everyone's needs and wants as best I could and overall I was satisfied with the results - good endings and all in all of my playthroughs, since I am a perfectionist and just *had* to keep everyone at least a bit happy - but every time I completed a chapter, I felt so sad for the person I had to neglect on that choice...</p> | |
| 2.3.11 | <p>Wow, thanks for saying so, Asuryan, I truly appreciate that. It's great to read that new people are still finding and enjoying the game 18 months after it came out ...</p> | |
| 2.3.12 | <p>I played this game to get my mind off an argument I had with my girlfriend, and it helped get me some perspective. You have made a very simple but very powerful game here. I might play this again someday when I need time to think. Thank you for a wonderful game. I think I will show this to my girlfriend, and the rest of my family. Thanks again.</p> | <p>Literature as therapy? Prof Philip Davis (Liverpool Uni) see further notes.</p> |
| 2.3.13 | <p>I just recently got your game and also wanted to say thanks, I've been really enjoying it so far. It really made me think and weigh the choices every time, trying to keep things in balance.</p> | |
| 2.3.14 | <p>i have only just got up to chapter 2 but already i am finding it much more compelling than Gone Home too.</p> | |
| 2.3.15 | <p>Thank you so much! I know I sound like a broken record every time I post in this thread, but it's true every time: it means the world to me to hear from people who are having such personal experiences with the game. Thank you for posting!</p> | |
| 2.4 | <p>This game hit me hard</p> | |

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| | <p>I feel like Dan.</p> <p>I'm working on my Master's thesis, and I'm pulled in three distinct directions, just like Dan.</p> <p>My Work, My Love, and My Family.</p> <p>This game really made me take pause and think about the decisions I've been making, and the rammifications.</p> | |
| 2.5 | <p>My interpretation (spoilers) As I played the game it started to become clear that 'the novelist' refers to the player, not Dan. You go around deciding everyone's fate, and each part of their lives is a chapter. And that became obvious at the ending, when Dan mentions he feels like he's a character in a novel. Makes a lot of sense but I don't know how the stealth mechanics fits into that, maybe that reflects how the novelist sees himself, like a ghost whispering to the characters what they should do.</p> <p>Then I went online to see of other reviewers share my interpretation and found nothing. Maybe I'm just tripping then. What do you guys think?</p> | |
| 2.5.1 | <p>I think that's a fair interpretation. :) For example, that's why I ended the chapters with a typewriter typing out the events ... it's like you're typing out what happens to the characters in your book.</p> <p>And in a larger sense, the game is about giving players authorship in a new way for games; if you want the nitty gritty details, I talked about it at GDC last year: https://www.dropbox.com/s/6hs5hy7t0eakb5y/KentHudson_GDC2014_TheSystemsTheMessage.pdf?dl=0.</p> <p>(In even more general terms, I spoke about player-driven stories at GDC 2011 as well. You can check out those talks here: onethree.org.)</p> | |
| 2.5.2 | <p>The dev himself :D That was a nice read, thanks for the nitty gritty details.</p> | |
| 2.5.3 | <p>Thanks for that extra insight into your design of the game. I found it very informative and helped me understand the game to a much greater extent. The story line itself is very pertinent to myself at this point in my life as I face many of the same struggles as Dan, although in a different field. I found myself choosing the outcomes I would wish I had made myself up to this point in my life rather than necessarily maximizing outcomes for everyone. I pulled my own personal narrative into the story you created and made it a story of my life. Thanks for such a wonderful experience. I look forward to exploring it further on additional playthroughs after having read your description of the mechanics and see how it changes the story and various emotional pulls throughout the course of the novel.</p> | |
| 2.5.4 | <p>Awesome, thanks for sharing! I'm really glad that you connected with the game on such a personal level; it was always my intent for people to use the game to explore their own emotions.</p> | |

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| 2.5.5 | <p>That was my interpretation also. Maybe the stealth comes into it because if we, as the author, revealed to the characters that they were merely characters in a novel, we'd end up with kind of a "Stranger than Fiction" scenario, where the characters would try to influence their own outcome :P I didn't actually play stealth mode, so I don't know though.</p> | |
| 2.5.6 | <p>Just finished the game. It was a deep gaming experience, in a way that you have to influence the family life of this threesome, and ... there will be frustration and disappointment.</p> <p>Dan supports the pressure. So does the player.</p> <p>Who is to sacrifice ? The answer relies on each of us, and strangely or not, you refer to your own experience of dilemmas in which you get involved in at times.</p> <p>I have a kid, now 13, and I experienced in the past to have to make a decision between taking care of him (playing together, reading stories, spending time,...) and personal or professional high level objectives.</p> <p>I approve what Ganji 608 wrote up there, though I cannot express it precisely and properly, by the fact that english is not my language.</p> <p>The ending choice I had to make at the end of the game was cruel, and I was quite happy with the consequences.</p> <p>So this story is remarkably well written, and makes a very original game. I have now to explore other endings, by taking other paths in the story. I'm afraid it can be annoying, too bad the save system does not allow to reroll the dice. Which is not a dice !</p> <p>Okay, a strange question now :</p> <p>A writer struggling with inspiration A wife and a lonely kid A remote place A big house with a past A spook ... Was Stephen King's The Shining an inspiration, or is it a coincidence ?</p> | |
| 2.5.7 | <p>I am a big Stephen King fan, but The Shining wasn't a direct influence on the game (though since I'm a fan of his, who knows how much unconscious inspiration comes through?). That said, I've often joked that the game is "Like The Shining if the ghosts could be nice, too."</p> <p>:)</p> <p>Anyway, thanks a ton for your kind words, it really makes my day to read things</p> | |

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| | <p>like that, especially from people who drew a personal connection to their real lives.</p> <p>And I know it might be frustrating to have to replay without being able to load your previous games, but it was a very conscious choice not to allow reloading; just like life, I wanted players to have to live with their decisions and base their future decisions on them.</p> <p>It's subjective, of course, but I think that when someone makes a decision they regret and they can't just reload and see what else happens, it gives the next chapter a lot more weight because while they might choose one thing in a vacuum, they now have the burden of thinking, "Yeah, but ... I really need to make it up to Tommy after I let him down last chapter."</p> <p>So, more like life, but maybe more frustrating in pure game terms. :)</p> | |
| 2.5.8 | <p>Definitely agree. You made a clever choice, without whom your game would be too easy to "experiment" and would lose this tension.</p> <p>Though I wish Life had Save and Load buttons sometimes !</p> | |
| 3.1 | <p>Just finished this game!!</p> <p>I started the game this morning, went to work, thought about it, then came home to finish it. It was a very fun and relaxing experience! I've always had dreams of becoming an author so I had to make some soul searching decisions when it came to deciding what to do in most of the situations. My final ending (SPOILERS) was that Dan took the professor job. Even though Linda was dissapointed she couldn't pursue her career their marraige became a happy and full relationship. I'm sad that I didn't help Tommy though. In his ending he lived a bland life with forgetful jobs and a few friends... (SPOILERS OVER)</p> <p>This game was very enjoyable. I doubt I'll play it again because I like to stick with my original story. I'll most likely just read different story lines online. Anyone else wanna share their first endings?</p> | |
| 3.1.1 | <p>Thanks for sharing your thoughts! I love it when players finish the game and feel at peace with their decisions. :)</p> | |
| 3.1.2 | <p>The game was great! I'm glad I could take part :)</p> | |
| 3.1.3 | <p>I literally just finished it and came on the forums to see if there were different outcomes! Just to let you know, I juggled the choices to try to keep everyone happy and Dan took the professor's job and was happy; Linda was disappointed, but she stayed an artist; the couple lived happily in an eternal honeymoon and; Tommy took a few months to adjust, but became the coolest kid in school, but remained friendly and grounded. When he left school, he became an artist and sold pieces to galleries!</p> | |
| 3.1.4 | <p>Woah, that sounds hard to get them all happy lol.</p> | |
| 3.1. | <p>LOL! Lots of compromises!</p> | |

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| 3.1. 6 | Wull, that's rad! It's pretty rare to navigate the game such that you get a good ending for everyone, but I love reading about it when it happens. :) | |
| 3.1. 7 | I have to say that the decisions I made felt very natural - fix the relationship first (to everyone's benefit), do as much with the novel as possible, then do what was necessary for the son's wellbeing. You designed it in a way that if you think "What will be best for the family?" it works out well! It's actually quite hard to do, because as a man, it felt easy to sympathise with Dan and you really felt his frustration. I loved this game, but I really feel like playing to see the other outcomes would somehow void "my world", so instead, my wife is playing through. It'll be the first game she's actually played herself! | |
| 3.1. 8 | Wow, that is so cool to hear! And I'm 100% with you on each playthrough being sort of definitive, if you're invested in the characters. That's why I intentionally didn't allow for save slots and reloading; I wanted every decision to be permanent, just like in life, so that if you regret a choice you've made you might have to alter your future choices to make up for it instead of just being able to reload and save-crawl through the game. | |
| 3.1. 9 | I had the exact same ending. I wonder what I could have done for Tommy. I often ignored his wishes, thinking he was tough and could handle not being the center of attention. Oh well. It's been a long time since I liked a game this much. Bravo Dev! | |
| 3.1. 10 | I have to agree with you, I left him out a few times, but I always picked him on things i thought were important such as helping him study. And then Linda was mad cause we didn't have family time at night! Pshh, I'm giving 2 hours in the morning for extra study time so that should count woman! Lol | |
| 3.1. 11 | Well, I just finished my game too so I want to share my ending. In my ending Dan didnt accept his job and decided to tutor tommy. This made possible to linda to enter de art school. Dan's and Linda's love grew deeper and they lived happily ever after. Tommy became a new kid, very popular and grew up to be a national graphical novelist. Unfortunately for Dan, he never finished is book and gave up on writing. He never found himself after that and just bumped from one job to another. I am a father so, in the end, I had to decide for tommy's future, specially since that was a good ending for Linda's too. Dan sacrificed his career for his family? Yes, sometimes that's what a father/husband does if you love your family. I enjoyed the game a lot, a big surprise for me :) | |
| 3.1. 12 | I just made a kind of a speed run picking Tommy every time. Here's the results: The game ends abruptly with Linda leaving in the second month. They end up with a divorce but Linda re-marries a few years later but Dan is alone forever. Auch! Tommy becomes award-winning graphics novelist and is super happy. Although with his parents problems I dont know why. | |

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| 3.1. 13 | <p>Woah! Thats really interesting. I wonder if there's any other abrupt endings you can have. I was thinking that it might be interesting to see what happens if half way through the game you just get spotted by all the family members purposely over and over. Does the game end? or?</p> | |
| 3.1. 14 | <p>My ending:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linda becomes full time artist, she's happy and has a wonderful marriage life with Dan. They live the rest of their live as if they are back at their younger days - as loving as before. - Dan continues to write and he does well with it. He ends up as a lecturer that deals with his writing. I think he's happy it even though it may not be his most favorite choice but I think it's the best overall decision for the family. - Tommy went back to his school and did well as he grows up. He ends up as a comic artist and has a happy family of his own. <p>I played the game as if I'm Dan and I asked myself what would I do for my family. While I made more sacrifices for the family, I feel that things are not that bad when your loved ones are happy. There is a saying "if you make your loved ones happy, you will also feel happy", I think it's true. My ending may not be the best for everyone, but I believe it's best for the family as a whole.</p> <p>I truly enjoy the game. :)</p> | |
| 3.1. 15 | <p>Thanks for sharing! Even though I haven't played in a while I still think of it occasionally.</p> | |
| 3.1. 16 | <p>Well my ending was pretty good, despite some conflicting information in the final scenes. For instance, when I made the choice to have Dan accept the professorship, it said that Linda felt sad her husband never supported her career, and that Tommy would have a hard time adjusting to the new school.</p> <p>Yet when it got to the actual ending, it said Dan became a very successful writer and lecturer, that Linda's love for Dan became stronger then ever, and that Tommy went back to school a new child full of wonder and energy and ended up as a successful graphic novelist.</p> | |
| 3.1. 17 | <p>That's a very strange ending haha. OR at least the conflict.</p> | |
| 3.1. 18 | <p>That's exactly the ending I got in my second run....</p> | |
| 3.1. 19 | <p>Just finished the game and I got a bad ending.</p> <p>Dan became a successful writer but he divorced and lived alone for the rest of his life. Linda married with another man few years after. And Tommy didn't catch up in school and suffered merciless bully. After he grew up he became and adult with few friends, jumping from a dead-end job to another.</p> <p>Well I think I got this ending because when playing the first chapter I felt like it</p> | |

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| | <p>was impossible to get everyone a happy ending so I decided to focus on Dan's career and his marriage, sacrificing his son. But I didn't expected that in the final part of the last chapter Linda would leave Dan because he neglected their son. Thinking now its the logical outcome since the mother would prioritize her son over the negligent husband. If I had given compromise to Tommy once more (I gave compromise to Tommy just once in the entire game) Linda wouldn't have left the house before the end of the game and I could get a different ending</p> <p>By the way, this is a great game, really enjoyed it!</p> | |
| 3.1.20 | Wow!! I didn't know that thanks for sharing! | |
| 3.1.21 | Wow, thanks for the post! It's not too often people find that ending, but I'm glad it at least made sense in hindsight. :) | |
| 3.1.22 | Now I know why I got that bad ending. Its because I didn't understand the game system correctly, I though that the Resolution was the Compromise and the choice I do during the black and white stage (when everyone is sleeping) was just for change the Resolution just in case I change my mind. So I chose only the Resolutions and not the Compromises. During the second playthrough I figured it out and could get a lot better ending haha. | |
| 3.1.23 | <p>Thanks for this little gem of a game! I enjoyed every minute of it, and I think the story was involving and enjoyable, the choices fairly logical, and the general mood of the whole game was very engaging. I actually become fond of this little family, and even though I took random choices all the way through(always compromising though), everything ended quite well for all three.</p> <p>I really liked the piano-music in the game, but I could not find anything in the credits about who has made the music. Also, it would be very interesting to see more games with the same engine. Perhaps even something that was more sinister and dark? Any plans?</p> | |
| 3.1.24 | <p>Hi, thanks for posting your thoughts! Very glad you enjoyed the game. :)</p> <p>For the piano music, I made it all, though it was actually done procedurally; the game is constantly generating an endless song, with no repetition. Every note you hear is its own unique snowflake. :)</p> <p>If you'd like to buy the soundtrack, it's available on iTunes and via Bandcamp[kenthudson.bandcamp.com] (I recommend Bandcamp for the best sound quality). It also comes with Humble purchases, if you got the game there or in a bundle.</p> <p>To make the soundtrack, I created a special mode for the game where it cycles through settings and scales and generates songs for hours on end. I recorded a ton of songs that way and picked my favorites for the soundtrack, so you'll be getting the same style if you buy the soundtrack but it's obviously not procedural. :)</p> | |

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| | As for more games in the same style, I don't currently have any plans for that. I'm working on a new (and completely different) game at the moment. | |
| 3.1. 25 | P.S. A while back I did a blog post about how the music is made: http://www.thenovelistgame.com/2013/07/07/soundtrack-preview-podcast-interview/ . | |
| 3.1. 26 | Hehe, impressive stuff! I would have guessed it was inspired by Harold Budd, but then it is purely mathematical! So since I like the ambient piano music from "The Novelist", there are not much need for composers anymore. ;-) Thanks for the info, I'll check it out on Bandcamp. | |
| 3.2 | Just Finsihed the game, it is so touching Thank you for the great game. It is one of the best games I have ever played. Much better than those RPGs you know... just about killing and violence. I thought of my relationship with my parents after playing the game... sometimes I am so selfish just like Tommy... Thinking that I am the most important child on earth. Well, my parents actually do sacrifice a lot in order to bring me a good life. Thank you producer... sincerely thank you for publishing such a great game. Looking forward to your new product xD. (SPOILER) I choose the ending that Dan turned down the job as an assistant professor. However, Dan live happily with his family ever after. The relationship between Linda and Dan is much better now. Everyday is a honeymoon vacation for them. And Tommy actually draws COMICS lol. Honestly, I love the ending I chose. Sometimes it is worthy to give up a dream but express your love towards your family members. I really love this story. (SPOILER END) Oh oh, by the way there are some comments. First, I am a Chinese (well... Hong Konger preferred :P). And ... I sometimes can't catch up with the subtitles as they are kind of too fast for me (I know this is my problem xD). Second thing is that... I guess for people in asia (you know... our mother tongue is not english), they prefer to have a subtitle with their own language. Anyway, just a few comments, it is still a perfect game for me as it helps me to reflect myself. Thank you a lot, game producer! P.S.: Please forgive me for my poor english :P | |
| 3.2. 1 | Wow, thanks so much for writing up your thoughts! As a dev, it really makes it worth it to hear players share their experiences. I'm really glad you were happy with your ending; thanks again for writing! P.S. As for subtitles, I would love to support multiple languages, but unfortunately the way the game is set up from a technical perspective makes that extremely difficult. As funny as it sounds, translating the text would be the easy part; the problem is that the text in the game is spread out over a huge number of hard-to-reach places, so it would take at least a month of tech work just to even get it into a state where it could be translated. Very sorry about that; for my next game I'm definitely going to put more of a focus on setting up all of the text content for easier translation. | |
| 3.2. 2 | I just finished my first playthrough and I agree - this was a refreshing change of pace from the usual games I play. It was well worth it and I'm glad to have the | |

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| | <p>chance to play. I made decisions as balanced as I could, and although its hard to qualif an ending as "best" I think the ending I did get was excellent.</p> <p>Dan chose to tutor Tommy and didn't take the professor job. His book wasn't a masterpiece but did well enough he kept writing more and became a guest lecturer. Tommy may not have been one of the super cool kids in school but he did well and became a skilled graphic novelist. Linda got to be an artist and her marriage with Dan is stonger than ever</p> <p>I really liked the way how difficult family decision making is portrayed in this game. The tantrum Tommy threw when he couldn't go to the airshow because dad was already balancing a funeral and a professional committment - as well as their concern for him felt especially true to life.</p> <p>People in a family are rarely going to all be happy with every decision - this game does a good job of showing how compromises can balance things out so that the family as a whole can still be healthy. I'm interested to see what would happen if I changed some things and will definitely be playing again - and looking for other titles created by this developer.</p> | |
| 3.3 | <p>My review/discussion - Would love to hear thoughts</p> <p>I posted this review at the end of last year (December 30) and just stumbled upon it as I logged into steam again today. Just thought I'd post it here because I have fond memories of the game and wanted to leave it as a discussion, although I'm not sure how much the game might've changed in the past year:</p> <p>My Review</p> <p>I'm just going to start off by saying that I loved this. Even though I was playing on my computer, it didn't feel like a game. It felt more like I was reading one of those choose your own adventure books, except with my mouse and keyboard.</p> <p>The story dragged me in very early, and I was emotionally invested from the start. I took about three and a half hours to play through it, as I wanted to make sure I found every piece of information, and spent time considering the decisions and what consequences each could have. While I made my decisions with all three of them in mind, I came to find that I felt like I was playing the character of Dan, which was easy for me to subconsciously drift towards as there was a closer connection to him in the game and I felt more disassociated with the ghost; like I was Dan calling the shots most of the time.</p> <p>I did my absolute best to make everything work for all of them, and made sure Dan didn't neglect his family, and although I felt like he was wasting his time with the book at that time, I still gave him plenty of things that helped with the book. It wasn't right, though, because he needed to sort out the rest of his life with his family and such first and then the book would come.</p> <p>In the end (of my story) Linda did the art thing part-time and Tommy was popular at school. Dan and Linda loved each other and lived the rest of their life like their honeymoon, but Dan's career went nowhere. I wondered if there was a perfect ending, if there was a chain of correct decisions I could have made which would have ended the story perfectly. I may play this through again, but probably not anytime soon, however I feel like there isn't a perfect solution,</p> | |

and the reason that there wouldn't be is not because a better ending wouldn't be possible, but because this game is supposed to pose the questions to us, not answer them. **What this game is here for is to give us perspective on life**, and I for one am glad that I stumbled across this game.

This review is for people who have played the game and possibly the people who made it, if they read this; it's not intended to be a review for anyone who hasn't played it. One thing that I also want to note is that I think the effects of the decisions in the game were not complex enough. There were usually three options, with each being good for one person and bad for the other two. If you had played it right, you could pick two, however I saw many things which I chose because in reality they would have helped more than one of them. For example, I felt that Dan playing the board game thing with Tommy would not only help Tommy, but also Dan, as it would allow him to have time with his son and focus on what's important, and I also thought it would be nice for Linda to see them two playing. I thought it might cheer her up, but there was nothing really to show any of that. Another decision I came across was Linda wanting to go camping and Dan wanting to collect firewood and go camping on the beach. I thought this was great because I could pick either one and they would both be happy, and so I picked Dan's one because I felt like Linda would be happy that Dan actually initiated the camping trip, plus Tommy would have a blast. Turns out she actually wanted to go camping in a different location, and she wanted to go there instead so much so that she left them and went there by herself, spraining her ankle in the process. That kinda baffled me.

Also, for the final decision, I still don't know what the difference between picking the backpack and the painting was? Both ways they stayed in Laurente and Tommy went back to school, however one way Linda painted full time and the other she painted part time. I think I chose the part-time because it was an unpaid thing it seemed like (all proceeds going to charity), and then Dan tutored Tommy, and worked part-time I believe. I'm not sure what the other option would have brought, but after re-reading all the information in that chapter before making the decision, I still couldn't figure out the difference. I guess if someone could explain it to me that would be cool.

So, while this is kind of technically a review, it's my feedback and opinion to the makers and everyone else, and possibly a request for explanation or discussion of certain areas.

Also, in my scenario, **I feel** that as Tommy got older, he would no longer require tutoring from Dan, which would free Dan up to take a full time job, or get back into writing full-time or just on the side, which I can't remember being mentioned in the ending scenario.

The gameplay wasn't perfect, and there were a few small issues for me, but despite all that, the story was untouched **and it still gave me same emotional response regardless**, so I give this game 100% on my scale. Thanks for the game, and even if no one reads this crazy long review-ish thing, it felt good to actually write out my thoughts... maybe I'll go somewhere for three months and write a whole book... (NOT!)

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| <p>3.3. 1</p> | <p>Wow, this was really great to read; thanks for posting it! To answer a few of your questions:</p> <p>The only major change to how the story works that came after you played it was fixing a bug that could have caused some people to get slightly worse endings than they expected. It was pretty rare, but you could have hit it. If so, sorry about that. :-/</p> <p>And as for the last chapter, it's a bit different and it does have some special scoring. But to your question of whether to pick the backpack or the painting, if you choose either then the other character automatically gets a compromise. So if you pick the backpack, Linda gets part of what she wants, and if you pick the painting then Tommy still gets some of what he wants. So it's sort of a more "Career vs. Family" decision. I wish I'd made that clearer to players. :-/</p> <p>If you really wanna nerd out about how the game works, I talked about it at GDC this year. I published my slides, and you can check them out here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/6hs5hy7t0eakb5y/KentHudson_GDC2014_TheSystemIsTheMessage.pdf. They explain how the relationship scoring works, and you might learn some surprising things about how the story is structured. :)</p> <p>Anyway, thanks again for playing and posting your thoughts! I always love seeing what players thought of the game.</p> | |
| <p>4.1</p> | <p>Does this game put family above art? Is the writer expected to sacrifice his art for his family?</p> <p>Not being sufficiently motivated into buying and playing this game, I am nevertheless interested whether it contains an underlying moral message regarding relationship between an artist's devotion to his art, and a parent's devotion to his family.</p> <p>History shows that many genius writers were really bad at maintaining family relationships. In some cases a troubled personal life might even have contributed largely to the artist's creativity.</p> <p>So what is the game's take on this? Is it really a completely sterile freedom-of-choice environment, totally dependent on the player's decisions, or is the player being influenced by the game into the direction of specific moral choices?</p> <p>What do you think is the authors' position on the art vs. family dilemma?</p> | |
| <p>4.1. 1</p> | <p>I think if you really have that talent you should not get married and have kids until after the project. As men, time is on our side.</p> <p>If you were dumb enough to have talent but get married and have a family anyway, then they should come first. Honour demands it!</p> | |
| <p>4.1. 2</p> | <p>Well, point is, having talent means you'll be making art your whole life. Or you should, at least. Therefore, sooner or later, the dilemma is going to appear.</p> | |

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| 4.1. 3 | The point of the game is for each person to answer that question themselves. You can definitely play it and focus 100% on Dan's writing ... and if you focus on that to the exclusion of the family, well ... the game will react appropriately. :-) | |
| 4.1. 4 | I'll give you just one example. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy had a very controversial personality and, judging by his wife's memoirs, was quite a house tyrant. Nevertheless, his family respected and followed him, both because of recognition of his immense value as a writer and philosopher, and also because they saw the good he was doing in his own domain. My point is, there seems to be a dichotomy at work that forces the player to "choose" between either creating art, or maintaining a family, and if he "chooses" art, then he will be "punished" by deteriorating family relations. But wouldn't such a dilemma be forced? Couldn't the family be supportive of the artist during his creative phase? | |
| 4.1. 5 | Generally, a question is, can the writer become great and acknowledged man living happily in adoration of fans and critics despite completely abandoning his family? Or would the game force all those "remorse" and "depression" cr@p onto him because his wife found herself another guy and the son becomes some kind of emo in his teenage years? | |
| 4.1. 6 | The game doesn't have randomly generated personalities. You have one man, one woman, and one boy, all of whom are who Kent made them, essentially. While other people would react completely differently, these are who you get to interact with. It's your choice to buy or not. That doesn't mean mods or sequels with a new group of people wouldn't be interesting. (If we're keeping to horror tropes, how about car breaking down on vacation and stuck in a motel, or suburbs built on a cemetery.) | |
| 4.1. 7 | The choice is really up to you, it is about how difficult maintaining a work/life balance is. First playthrough, I neglected the son all the way. Next playthrough, I'll only focus on the writing (by not going for the compromise). Another playthrough, just Dan + Tommy. Quite open ended, really. | |
| 4.1. 8 | *SPOILER WARNING* Unlike Tolstoy I think this family, in the game, is on the edge of collapse as the game starts. The boy is bullied and about to crack under the pressure, the man and wife's marriage is close to break. All three members of the family goes to the cabin on the cliff with different needs and wishes for the summer. And all three is super needy to get their own needs fulfilled. There is too late for being super supportive to each other as the time is about to run out for the family. And I think that is what the game is about, how to manage the time of the last weeks of the family and see how the future will become for them depending of you choices. | |

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| | And you get the choice to compromise. But only two family members at the time and the at the cost of things being "half done". | |
| 4.1.9 | <p>This all just sounds so forced. It's like the player always loses somewhere, so it doesn't matter how "well" you play, or the fact that in reality a completely positive outcome is always possible (you just need to try hard enough and do the right things).</p> <p>If I understand correctly, the game just railroads you into a scenario where you have to choose between becoming a successful writer and maintaining your family. You can keep ONE other member of the family happy, but at the cost of your success.</p> <p>I am sorry, but this is just frigging pessimistic. What kind of value is that? That you ALWAYS lose either your career or your family? WTF dude?</p> <p>I wonder if the author of this game had any family troubles while he was making it. And whether he had to make "compromises" which resulted in the game being what it is.</p> | |
| 4.1.10 | <p>It makes sense though, based on the premise of the game. The male isn't talented enough to be a creative book writer without working hard at it, which is why he can't manage to maintain any semblance of a great family while he's trying to write a book. He wasn't able to manage his relationships.</p> <p>Since the game is based on the premise of us being at the edge of despair and the destruction of a family, we guide them so that something gets saved. It's much better than in real life where there's a good chance that everything will go wrong and nothing gets saved.</p> <p>Yes, there's a chance that if you make the right choices, and everyone around you happen to be in agreement and are the exactly right type of person for the situation to go well, then in real life everything could go positive. But the chances of that really are slim in actuality, when the circumstances are already so dire, and you've only got a scant 3 months to fix it all.</p> <p>If the scenario was for a more talented writer with a family that wasn't falling apart and had so many problems then I would have expected us to be able to make everybody happy if made the right choices, but it isn't. As such, in my honest opinion, the game is actually quite optimistic.</p> | |
| 4.1.11 | The game is extremely well done. It's up to you whether you want to give it a shot or not, though I felt it was a realistic story and highly recommend it. | |
| 4.1.12 | <p>I would also highly recommend the game. If the author has a message, it's not that family is to be placed above art, or art above family, or any combination of that - that's for you to decide.</p> <p>I would say that what he *is* trying to communicate is that, because life is about choices, life is about sacrifices.</p> | |

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| 4.1. 13 | I am really enjoying this game, because I relate to the tensions experienced by the characters! Just play it and see what you think! | |
| 4.1. 14 | <p>As soon as I finish the first round of playing I figured I'd replay it again and pick the alternatives that I didn't chose the first time. I think its finding a balance between work and family. Artsy? Yes. A lot harder than I previously thought it'd be? Yes. As a wife, mother, and novelist myself its actually a pain in the butt trying to make compromises when there is always SOMEONE at a complete loss in the end. In the first chapter, it was the poor kid that was at a loss and it killed me. But then I remember what its like to be neglected as a wife so if I would have given the kid the option, she'd be at a loss and feeling like ♥♥♥♥. Then there's the novelist who's going to be damned if he does and damned if he doesn't, it put things into perspective. A lot of it is communication based and perception of the various individuals within the game.</p> <p>I think its also an exercise in empathy as well, or at least that is what I'm gathering from it.</p> | |
| 4.1. 15 | <p>See, that's what I'm talking about. The Novelist is "damned" whatever his choice. All the player can achieve is choose which member of the household will feel miserable and fail life goals. This is, in my opinion, a very biased and pessimistic outlook. It proceeds from the assumption that all family members are selfish and short-sighted, and cannot see beyond their own immediate "needs".</p> <p>In real life, people - if they are normal, adequate people - understand limitations and SUPPORT each other, rather than just selfishly demanding attention and feeling bad when they don't get it.</p> <p>E.g. in a normal family one or both parents have to work. That means they're physically incapable of always being with each other or their children. That is NORMAL and not something to make a tragedy of. If the husband is the "breadwinner" and has to work hard to sustain his family, then the wife should support him and understand that he can't ALWAYS "be there" for her. She should focus on the kid instead, so they can both keep each other happy while the dad is at work. They should also go out more and make friends on the outside - which is apparently NOT an option in this game.</p> <p>Of course, they can all engage in a collective circle-... pat on the head, spending tons of time with each other. But guess what - then they won't be able to do their jobs, won't pay the bills, won't send their kid to college, and just generally fail at life!</p> <p>Yeah, life is about making compromises. But it is not BAD, like this game makes it seem. It's just NORMAL, nothing to make a fuss about, something that should be taken in stride by ALL members of the family, including children. Instead of pouting and demanding, they should learn to make the best of their situation and be HAPPY from it.</p> | |
| 4.1. 16 | Give it a go, Blackdragon. You've been sufficiently motivated into making a lot of very good points, as have the other commentators on this thread. It has | |

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| | convinced me into a purchase, much food for thought here. | |
| 4.1. 17 | ...dude, it is possible to have a life and a family - to be an artist and a father. I presume from your comment that one of three things may be true. 1: you are inexperienced in life or are too young to be experienced in this matter, 2: you are single and looking for a reason not to commit to family life or 3: you are married to an unsupportive spouse (or you have a father who is whipped). all of these possibilities work whether you are talented or not. | |
| 4.3 | Halfway through my thoughts so far.... I think I'm about halfway through and I gotta say the whole feel of the game is depressing thus far, don't get me wrong I'm not saying that's a bad thing i'm enjoying it. The art style and sound give me a feeling of hopelessness, the same goes for the majority of the storyline up to this point. I'm taking a break, will finish up the game tomorrow and post back with my final thoughts so if you reply to this please don't include any major spoilers as to how the story goes :) | |
| 4.3. 1 | Hello. Not sure if this is still relevant and all, what with this post being from so many months ago, but figured I'd give it a shot (hope I'm doing all this right-never posted on a forum before). I just found this really interesting, because I feel the exact same way, but wasn't sure quite how to describe it before this. So thanks. But the entire game really does give off a certain somberness. By the way, did you ever get to finish the game, and did you enjoy it if so? | |
| 4.3. 2 | I just started and right off the bat it seemed just steeped in melancholy. I like it, its interesting, but kinda a downer. | |
| 4.3. 3 | Left to their own devices, the family will probably degenerate and split up, with everyone being miserable. But they have you, _____ The Friendly Ghost. Or not-so-friendly, that's up to you. I feel the Kaplans made a number of bad life choices before they got to the house, and that they aren't mature enough or capable of making any good choices without help. That happens to a lot of people, maybe all of us. You can make good choices for them, and there are uplifting moments to the game, some of which are very powerful. Or you can make bad choices and drag the Kaplans down to the lowest common denominator. They aren't real, after all - I hope | |
| 4.3. 4 | I agree; the Kaplans would most likely fall apart on their own. It's sad, really, but I guess it teaches some good life lessons about compromise and focusing on others rather than just yourself. The game is a complete downer. But at least it has its happy moments now and then, depending on your choices. | |
| 4.4 | This seems personal... ..and I can tell it will be for me too. I love games that hit on subjects like these, ones that people can relate to whether the subject matter is good or bad. Seems people that are hating on this are overexposed to what has become the "norm" for video games recently; AAA blockbusters with no emotion or feeling (of course there are exceptions). Just wanted to pay respect and inform that | |

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| | I've encountered some of these things in my life and it has really hit home. Also I'm sorry I can't purchase this a second time. Make me another game to play or let me join you and become a creative partner! | |
| 4.4. 1 | So, what sort of art is your focus of interest? I related more to Linda than Dan since I'm visual, but I have a number of writer friends. | |
| 4.4. 2 | Yeah I haven't played it myself but I can see how it touches on personal emotions. But I have a question: Did you find it to be therapeutic in dealing with the issues that it approaches or was it bit gloomy like say dear Esther? I am thinking of buying this for a friend who is perhaps not the creative type, but is definitely a Literati. He also struggles with depression. Will this be a good game to gift? Also, how much freedom and choice do you have in the game and how long will it last? In other words how immersive did you find it to be? | |
| 4.4. 3 | Yay, I get to use my psychology degree. Dear Esther is a pretty good comparison. Imagine a far less beautiful-to-look-at Dear Esther with more choices and a little less ambiguity. There is also a lot of repeated back-and-forth movement to search for things and the family is about as appealing as any regular family, so sometimes spending time in the house is a bit of a chore. You can screw over the Kaplans and/or try to help them out. The game seems to be a meditation on the value of choice and commitment. I've got my dark moods as well, and so I can sympathize a bit towards the characters. They mostly bicker and then deal with alcoholism, and then the fallout of their/your decisions. There are lessons to be learned on the value of love and interpersonal fidelity, but I wouldn't say the game is therapeutic. It's more of an essay. If you are good at talking things through with your friend, then it's a fair game to explore. I think you'd have to be a cold-hearted gamer to play this and not talk about it with someone, like even here on the forum. If you insist on playing the game out and not sharing, then you'll find the Kaplans to be self-centered and destructive, which they are when you first meet them. It took me two hours total to run through the summer with the Kaplans once, but there is replayability to discover new outcomes. The story arc remains basically the same throughout, though. The art in the the game, for a game about artists, is painfully limited no doubt due to budget. We never find out much about the novelist's book, and his wife's paintings are peurile and obvious. Even the boy is no great communicator, but he churns out a series of drawings that look like kids' art but were obviously (to me, anyways) drawn by an adult. So you won't pick up anything substantial on how artists strive for technique - everything happens off-screen for that. You just see how folks deal with work versus home life, just like the rest of us schmoes. They could be a family of luchadores - masked Mexican soap opera wrestlers - for all the difference their work makes in the | |

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| | <p>game.</p> <p>Depression is a difficult topic, but I am for using thoughtful games to break the cycle. You'd have to know what the source of the depression is, personal frustration, chemical imbalance, family anger, all that wonderful stuff to be able to pick out a game. For example, one of my good friends gets frustrated when she feels like she has lost control in her life. Puzzle games like Tetris, Bejewelled, and Plants versus Zombies usually improve her mood, although she will binge on those games for hours at a time. I deal with issues of confidence - pretty normal for an artist - so I like turn-based games with a narrative I can follow to a definite conclusion. Anything like XCOM or Civilization is great for that. Someone who likes good reading in their gaming might respond well to The Banner Saga, 7 Steps, Conquistador, or and/or Dangerous High School Girls In Trouble! Then, there's always The Sims, which you can try to play as a simulator. Once, my wife and I opened a bottle of wine, created models of ourselves in the game, and let them go at it until one of them got pregnant. We discovered what our sim-child would have been like - very trippy.</p> <p>And bless you for thinking of gifting games, what a great idea! I have a spare copy of Tropico 4 (which is a pretty sweet game) and a spare copy of Omerta (which I would not wish on my worst enemy) from pre-ordering Tropico 5, and none of my friends are eager for those games. If you want them to give to your friend - if you do end up giving them to your friend - drop me a line and you can have them.</p> | |
| <p>4.4. 4</p> | <p>Many thanks for the long reply Twelvefield! Now I am tempted to try it myself ! :)</p> <p>Yes depression is indeed a difficult subject and it is often hard to identify its root causes. The person I am thinking of giving this to, is not exactly a family man... He is a bookstore manager, a homosexual New-yorker, a bit of commitment-phobe and quite a distinct individual. So, from what I have seen, he probably has more in common with Tommy, than Linda and Dan! I watched the reviews and I liked the fact that you can go through other people's minds and I got the impression that it would somehow help you improve and balance your interests and ambitions with the mutual understanding of people in your life. I am worried that it would have an opposite effect if it is hard to make everyone at least relatively happy, and if life is portrayed to be too mundane.</p> <p>Oh Btw, we seem to have a smiliar taste in games. I too am a fan of 7 Grand steps, civilization and turn based and card games in general; and can relate to what you say about video games being helpful in dealing with mental health issues, giving a sense of control, etc.</p> <p>I have actually played Tropico! I got the complete edition actually so I have got versions 1-4 but I have only had the chance to play the first one! :) Didn't find it as appealing as civilization but maybe that was because I only played myabe 2 or 3 hours of it.</p> <p>My friend is a mac user though (yeah, why are we even friends?! :D) so unfortunately it's no use, but I really appreciate the offer!</p> | |
| <p>4.4.</p> | <p>A mac user... get him to a doctor who will see that he gets the right medication,</p> | |

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| 5 | <p>stat! Only the strongest intervention can ever help that poor, misguided lost soul.</p> <p>Tropico is a blast, in my opinion. It does take a long time to play out, but most of the storyline Missions are very easy to beat. The fun in the game is all the attention to Tropic culture and lifestyle... I'd move there in a heartbeat. Tropicos 3 & 4 are very highly polished games, and are much more user-friendly than the previous ones. But if I had to be with just one game, I'd take Civ over Tropico.</p> <p>I'm going to add that there are themes of confusion and suicide in The Novelist, since there is sort of a parallel plot where if you want to look you can find clues as to how and why the terrific house never has permanent tenants. I found the clues rather vague, possibly because I did not find them all, but they do suggest who the player is and why the player is stuck in the house with the Kaplans. Maybe there are stronger answers to those questions, but I find it interesting that in my gameplay the solution is never presented.</p> <p>Still, there is one part of the game that really lingers for me and gives me the creeps in a big way: that all of the electrical appliances in the house - the lights, the fridge, and especially the television - all are functional despite that there are no electrical cords or outlets to be found anywhere in the house . You'll have to imagine the last bit with me holding a flashlight under my chin. Scary stuff, kids!</p> | |
| | <p>Thanks. Ended up buying a copy from the humble spring sale! Will let you know my thoughts on it when I got the chance to play.</p> | |
| 4.5 | <p>I know this makes me a bad person but Linda annoyed me I found it hard to take her needs as seriously as Dan and Tommy's. I've only played the game once so far, though I will definitely play it again, so maybe it's the options I chose but Linda just seemed like a buzz kill to me.</p> <p>Then I wondered if I was simply being sexist. I hope not. And I've never thought about that when gaming before. I love how The Novelist throws up some deep questions.</p> <p>So, did anyone else struggle to warm to Linda?</p> | |
| 4.5.1 | <p>Have to be honest with this one I felt like throughout the game she was getting more and more selfish. (Although at one point she took a hike by herself because i chose the other two characters and she twisted her ankle so GG, Linda) IT just felt like she constantly wanted Dan to not work on his book at all or spend less time with the kid and completely throwing away the whole concept of "the kid comes first." So nope you weren't the only one!</p> | |
| 4.5.2 | <p>Fascinating. I imagine that we interpret the characters through our own perspective. I am a childless woman and I write for a living as a part of my job, so I find myself empathetic toward Linda and Dan, and I am probably neglecting Tommy!!!</p> | |
| 4.5. | <p>I think that's exactly it. I mainly focussed on Dan and Tommy because I was</p> | |

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| 3 | putting Tommy first and Dan seemed to mean more to him so I was also trying to make Dan happy. If I look at my real life I can see exactly where that motivation comes from. Plus, Linda annoyed me. | |
| 4.5. 4 | Linda seemed somewhat selfish throughout the game, though I felt the selfishness was more from she being tired from him having writers block and demaning so much to break it. | |
| 4.5. 5 | I'm a woman, wife, and writer and I agree that Linda tended to be selfish. The only way she was happy was if I put her above everything- if you don't spend your inheritance on her but get her into the coop by working for them, she feels disappointed (even if what you spent the money on was Tommy). If we go to Blaster Bay instead of the camping trip, she's upset. And the camping trip made Tommy and Dan upset, even with a compromise. I got the feeling that Linda doesn't understand the struggle of writing since painting seems to come so easily to her. I would have liked one of the challenges being "painter's block" so Dan could help her with it and she could get some empathy for his situation. Of course, Dan struggles so much with writing that I was also wondering if maybe he should give it up or focus on being a short story writer instead of a novelist, at least for a time. | |
| 4.5. 6 | I'm a woman and I hated Linda too. I was expecting her to be at least a little bit happy when Tommy is happy, like a normal mother would be, but no. Always whining about something, couldn't take her seriously at all. | |
| 4.5. 7 | The biggest event I went full "yes, this is important" was the funeral for Linda, but while she seemed selfish she was trying to reconnect with her husband (at an awkward time) as she realized their relationship and marriage was falling apart: this time at the cabin the last time they would have to reconnect. It's not just about the novel, etc. It's about family. | |
| 4.5. 8 | She came across more like a plot device than an actual character many times to me, like she just got upset about taking the kid on a trip instead of using her camping suggestion purely because the game needed her to be upset for some reason. | |
| 4.5. 9 | I was trying to make the whole family happy. And for the most part, I succeeded. I agree with everyone though. Linda pisses me off. | |
| 4.5. 10 | I'm not sure whether this really "makes you a bad person", Tarago. Seems like your opinion is shared by many, including me. However, I think that it is intentional that Linda's needs and moods sometimes seem a little overstretched. During my play of the game, there were several points where it could not be obvious for Dan what the motives behind Tommy's and Linda's wishes were... but isn't that kind of the point? Going out of your way because you love people? A motive, by the way, that is extremely prevalent in entertainment media these days. | |
| 4.5. 11 | I've wanted Dan Kaplan to go Jack Torrance all of a sudden and waste both of them. That's how my they've annoyed me. | |

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| <p>4.5. 12</p> | <p>Well, I disagree completely.</p> <p>Linda is self-centered, but she's certainly not selfish. True selfishness is the heart of evil. If Linda was that evil, she would never be able to love Dan or Tommy.</p> <p>Out of all the characters, I related the strongest to Linda. I am also a visual artist and I can write.</p> <p>I thought Dan's book was crap right from the get-go. The reason behind my assessment is that Dan is just not a fully grown adult. He's allowed himself to fall into an untenable position by following the leads and examples of people who don't value Dan's worthiness as a person (his business minded publisher, and the "friend" from whom he poached the idea for his original book), and of course Linda is going to react to that. Naturally Dan's writing will suffer, too. Raymond Chandler didn't start writing until he was 45. Unfortunately, he was as much an alcoholic wreck as Dan's hero Hemingway. Chandler and Hemingway didn't have a Linda to get him past alcoholism.</p> <p>On the other hand, giving Linda everything she thinks she needs would just lead to disaster. And I can't say I like her paintings. Like or dislike doesn't mean much: she's working in oils and she runs through a canvas a month - that's just too fast for a conventional artist to come up with anything good. (Insane artists are usually the exception to this rule, but that variety of artists don't set themselves up with families in luxury homes. They thin their oils with gasoline so that they can paint faster and go mad from the fumes.) Seeing as it can take a day or two or more just for the paint to dry correctly, you don't get a lot of time to play with oils unless you take months, not weeks on a project. Nor did she seem all that deeply interested in technique. Her work, as the connoisseurs will say, uses a lot of colours straight from the tube. So we will add Linda to the category of adults who are not grown-up.</p> <p>A summer of figuring out how to be mature adults is what both Linda and Dan needed, and if you play the game that way, it's what they get. You cannot have Dan without Linda and Linda needs Dan. Together, they fulfill their lives through Tommy.</p> | |
| <p>5.1</p> | <p>So I just finished the first month What I wish I would have known before buying:</p> <p>1) This far,(1/3 into the game) the story has no depth. I find myself reading too far into the meanings of things only to be disappointed. the game breaks life down into a series of multiple choice questions. You chose B? Well, B happened.</p> <p>2) Theres no puzzles, nothing to interpret, no fighting, no mystery (besides the nightly letter about your ghostly self) and no action. With a name like "the novelist" and a play option called "story" I expected more plot, sure. but complaint #2 is that there is nothing else exciting either.</p> <p>3) I'm only part way through, so I suppose there is time for this game to redeem</p> | |

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| | <p>its self but that leads to my last complaint. The audio convinces me more to sleep, than play the game. The background music sounds like it was inspired by spa ambiance music, and the voice acting makes kristen stewart sound like an emotional basket case.</p> <p>Finally, It wouldn't be fair to not finish the game...and so I will. I just have a lot to say even this far into The Novelist so I figured I'd make two posts; one now, one after I complete the game. I love a good adventure game, something that feels more like playing through a novel rather than the overwhelming number of shoot em' ups that has me searching for games like the Novelist. But hey, maybe I'll have to eat my words later. fingers crossed.</p> | |
| 5.1.1 | <p>That's just you being pseudo-intellectual. Just as not everything has to be about space marines, not every game has to be about the pain and anguish of existence. Sometimes a slice-of-life experience is worth its weight in gold, if it's done right. The game carries its own message, too -- the compromises present within any family. What you give up, and what you gain, and the balances therein.</p> <p>I'm guessing that you're a teenager (late teens?) and you've never experienced a family from the parental side of things, so the underlying purpose of the game is lost on you. You'd probably be better off with something more angsty. I can have tastes for that, occasionally, too. I'm just also smart enough to realise that something doesn't have to be riddled with deep, introspective angst in order to be good.</p> <p>Try The Path instead. It'll be more up your alley. Come back to The Novelist once you've grown up a bit.</p> | |
| 5.1.5 | <p>This game is a brilliant change of pace from a lot of other games. I'm not sure if I've ever seen a game that fits into 'real life' (define that however you wish) so well as this one. A lot of the scenarios in here are perfect practice for what people would really want out of life, and I'm learning things about myself playing this. It's really interesting.</p> <p>Certainly may not be for everybody, but nothing worth anything ever is.</p> | |
| 5.2 | <p>Side Stories</p> <p>I'm going through my third playthrough and I keep wondering about how the side stories ended.</p> <p>The first one (Harold Baxter) is easy enough since it directly impacts the Kaplan's.</p> <p>But what was Claire's decision?</p> <p>Did the widowed woman, K Williams, walk off a cliff or go back to her family?</p> <p>Each of these stories seems to indicate the ghost's presence, but I never found anything to explain the ghost. Where did I come from? Why am I hanging around interfering with people's lives?</p> | |
| 5.2.1 | <p>Good questions! I went back and forth on this a lot, and ultimately decided to never explicitly say who or what the ghost is. Some playtesters wanted to know, but when I talked to them I used a made-up example and said, "Okay, if</p> | |

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| | <p>the game says that you're the architect of the house and that he killed himself after his wife left him, would that make you enjoy the game more?"</p> <p>When I put a specific origin on the ghost, no one who'd previously wanted to know actually liked it.</p> <p>Further, I shied away from saying who the ghost is because I always wanted the player to be the author of the story, and I wanted the player to make decisions in line with their own values and opinions. I worried that as soon as I gave a specific backstory to the ghost, it would start influencing player choices: "Hrm, I think I should choose Linda here, but it seems like the dead architect would side with Dan, so ..."</p> <p>In the end, I just felt that explaining specifically who the ghost is would hurt the player's ability to tell a more personal story. This is all completely subjective, of course; there are definitely people who want to know the origin story, and for whom an origin story would improve the game.</p> <p>Anyway, I know that probably isn't the most satisfying answer, but I did want to at least chime in on why I made that specific decision</p> | |
| 5.2. 2 | <p>Oh, and as for the resolutions of the side stories, I also left those subjective intentionally. I tried to write them such that when Claire and K---- had their, "I've decided what to do" moments, players could interpret them either way. The functional point of those stories was just to give some general backstory: the ghost has been in this house for quite some time, and has been making these types of influential decisions for people (that's why no one before Harold Baxter's visit could stand to live in the house for long periods).</p> <p>I know there's probably more ambiguity in these side stories than some players want, but what can I say? I like ambiguity. Though again, the goal was for each player to envision their own endings. My hope is that each player thinks about the struggles of those characters and has some personal intuition about how the stories end. That all just feeds into the larger goal of the game, which is to let each player tell a personal story, instead of having everyone get the same narrative every time.</p> <p>Out of curiosity, what do you think happened to Claire and K----? :-)</p> | |
| 5.2. 3 | <p>I thought those might have been intentionally vague :) I mean, if I've been in the house since before there was a house/since it's construction, and I guided K to commit suicide, why the heck am I helping Dan? ...unless i'm not helping him...</p> <p>I like to think that Clair had an open and frank discussion with her fiance, though for the time frame, it probably ended without a wedding and she found someone for whom she didn't have second thoughts. If it didn't, then they probably had a well balanced and satisfying wedded life. I also like to think that K gained comfort and went back to her family, learning to live with the loss of J.</p> | |
| 5.2. 4 | <p>Hehe, awesome. I like your endings. :-)</p> | |

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| 6.1 | <p>Oh come on! *LOTS OF SPOILERS*</p> <p>So I just wrapped up my first playthrough and in the end:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dan took the Job - Linda felt unsupported - Tommy grew up w/no friends and an emo jumping from job to job <p>I'm sorry but as much as I enjoyed this game (I really did enjoy it) the conclusions are a bit extreme, especially considering some of the earlier choices I had made.</p> <p>Linda feels unsupported?? I gave up my book signing to go to her grandma's funeral. I sacrificed work time to spend time with her. I can't stand people that forget the good and flip on me the second they don't get what they want.</p> <p>Tommy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I built the car with him - Play the game with him - Skipped going to the air show - Skipped going to the 'rocket place' <p>Now I understand moving can be hard on a kid. Sounds like he was ADD and so meds could straighten out his school progress and boost his confidence. (I speak from first hand experience with my daughter). When I was 14 I moved from where I grew up....from up north to the deep south (US) and we dropped a few income brackets in the process and my dad too working so much I didn't get to interact much. Did it affect me, sure but in the end I have served in the military, now have a successful career, loving family, many friends.</p> <p>Yes I understand each person is different, but I can't buy into that missing an airshow is going to push the kid to abandon all his passions and become an insecure drifter. Maybe if you limit the scope more on his future...maybe take it to a few years ahead instead of covering his whole life it would be a bit more believable.</p> <p>As I said before, I did really enjoy the game. And you can see it was successful in spurring an emotional response from this gamer :P I just relate to it a bit so much so that when the endings didn't go as I thought (or went waaaaaay worse than I thought) it threw me off a bit.</p> | |
| 6.1.1 | <p>Well, sure - in the real world, the things a family does during one summer (whether or not to go to a funeral, or to an airshow, or whatever) won't usually decide the fate of the whole family. But the idea with this game is to take a snapshot of a life, and see the consequences if the spirit of the actions that you've taken were to play out throughout the course of their lives.</p> | |
| 6.2 | <p>Let's draw some comparisons to other games because asking if it's "good" is completely pointless. I'm guessing this is one of those "gray area" games when it comes to actual player engagement. So let me / other interested parties know how it compares to these. Or if you have other good comparisons, share them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gone Home | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kentucky Route Zero - Home - Point-and-clicks in general <p>If somebody says "like Gone Home, but longer than 2 hours and there's something bearing a slight resemblance to actual gameplay and people aren't just giving it perfect reviews to look intellectual," I'm sold. What? I'm not bitter about VGX, why would you think that?</p> <p>Thanks in advance to anyone being helpful.</p> | |
| 6.2.1 | Just started the third chapter and I am liking it. I am taking it slow and enjoying the atmosphere and excellent voice acting. If you have kids, or a family the game brings much more of an emotional impact to the table. It's definitely worth \$15.00. | |
| 6.2.2 | I'm excited to see the answers! :-) | |
| 6.2.3 | <p>To me, it feels like a minimalist adventure game such as the ones you mentioned. Maybe with a bit of The Walking Dead thrown in as there are decisions that can be made that effect the characters in the game. But unlike The Walking Dead, you can get a different ending depending on what path you go down in regards to how you treat yourself, wife, and son.</p> <p>I really don't like comparing it to The Walking Dead because I did not care for that game and feel The Novelist is superior to it when it comes to story telling and giving weight to choices.</p> <p>Oh, there's a stealth mechanic in the game that I turned off for my first playthrough so I can enjoy the story. I plan on going through it again with stealth turned on to see how it is.</p> | |
| 6.2.4 | <p>It's Gone Home but with actual ghosts!</p> <p>It has an actual branching narrative and the best use of moral choices much like Papers Please, where you use real world logic rather than trying to the game the sytem to get the best rewards. You can't do save scumming or quick saves, and the ending builds up to your actual actions (I neglected the son all the way) rather than some canon ones like in typical games (Deus Ex, Mass Effect, etc), so in order to see the other branches, you need to do more than one playthrough. Which means the replayability factor is quite high!</p> | |
| 7.1 | <p>The Shining.</p> <p>My question is really common and obvious. Can i drive someone to madness and affect the storyline ?</p> | |
| 7.1.1 | I was thinking the EXACT same thing! This game has cruelty potential oozing out of every orifice! I hope the devs took advantage of that. That would be my dream game! | |
| 7.1. | The Shining was the first thing that came to mind when I read the description. | |

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| 7.1. 3 | I was just about to ask the same question. Please let it be true. | |
| 7.1. 4 | ging into to tommy's memoeries, he saw the twins, Dan wants to buy an axe, etc. | |
| 7.1. 5 | The world owes us this after Lucius. Sadly, this developer is already at work on their next project, the dark tale of a misunderstood cold virus and her attempts to make peace between the estranged communities of Boulder and Las Vegas. | The Stand? |
| 7.1. 6 | The misunderstood cold virus that kills the elderly, young and pregnant women? Pfft... | |
| 7.1. 7 | Not that common, not that obvious. Congrats ;) For some, I don't doubt it. | |
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