Anti-Narrative and the Absence of Mastery: the Inherent Contradictions of *Dear Esther*

  Dear Esther is an experimental video game originally created by Dan Pinchbeck and later redesigned and rebuilt by Robert Briscoe. Instead of focusing on the traditional game elements of learning and mastering skills and using them to solve puzzles, kill enemies, or otherwise progress through the levels and learn the story, Pinchbeck and Briscoe designed *Esther* to require almost no input from the player. The "game" is actually an interactively told story.

  From the opening scene, we quickly learn that this game is unlike any we have ever played before. *Dear Esther* is a first-person walking simulator, but a simulator in which the player is unable to interact with the world in any way. The "gameplay" consists solely of exploring a Hebridean island off the coast of Scotland while random pieces of the plot are revealed by a narrator (presumably the character we control), who is reading letters he wrote to the titular Esther. While the player does seem to have some impact on which narrative fragments are revealed and when by choosing where to travel, it is marginal at best (see Fig. 1 on pp. 2-3). Certain parts of the story may often seem to relate to a specific location on the island and only appear when said location is reached, but there are often many possibilities for the game to choose from. Even though the player chooses where his character walks, subtle visual cues and proxy walls (invisible barriers that block the player's progress) ensure that the player will eventually follow the path that the game's designers intended. Therefore, the player's impact on the game and its story is minimal: *Dear Esther* is meant to be experienced rather than played.
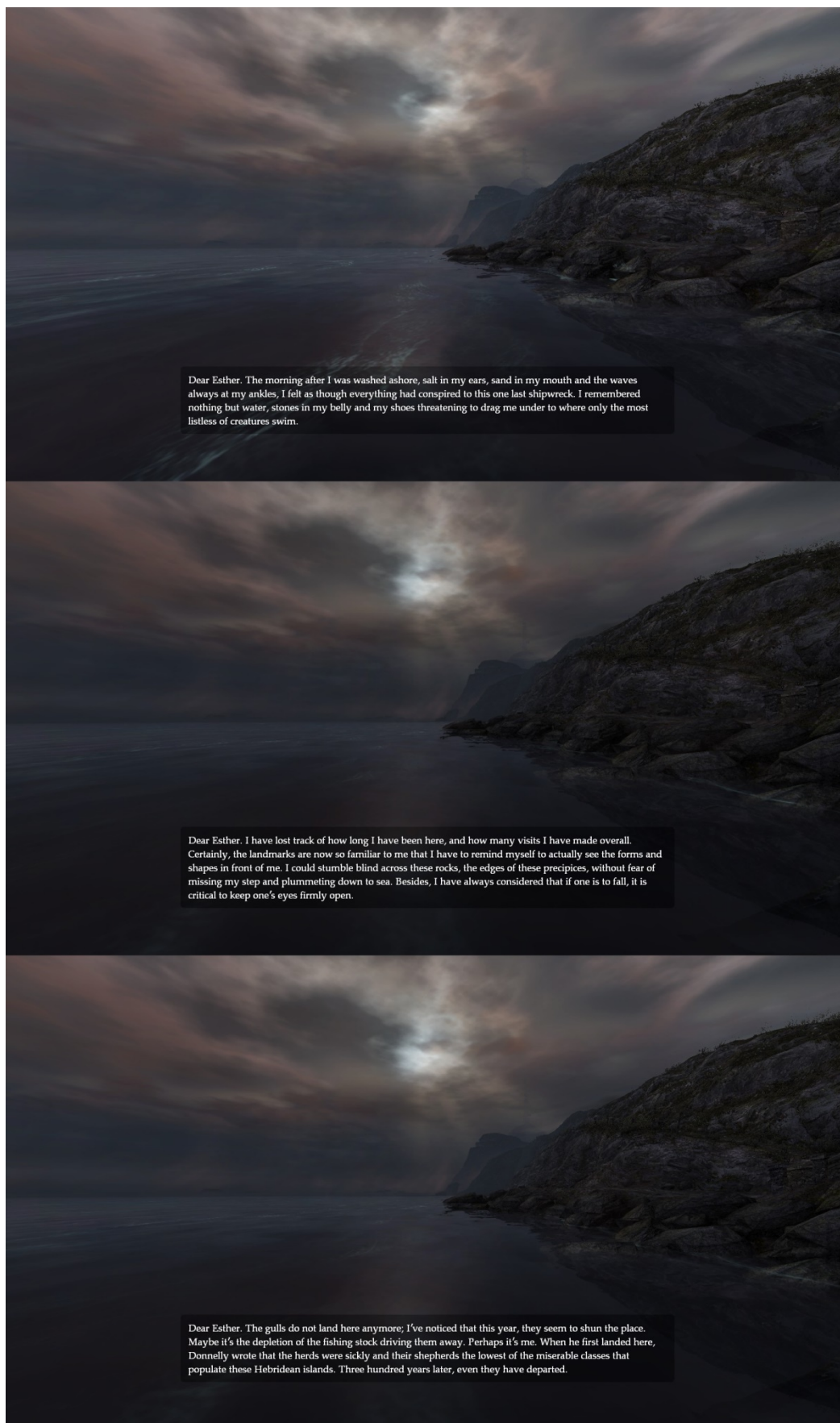
Dear Esther. The morning after I was washed ashore, salt in my ears, sand in my mouth and the waves always at my ankles, I felt as though everything had conspired to this one last shipwreck. I remembered nothing but water, stones in my belly and my shoes threatening to drag me under to where only the most listless of creatures swim.

Dear Esther. I have lost track of how long I have been here, and how many visits I have made overall. Certainly, the landmarks are now so familiar to me that I have to remind myself to actually see the forms and shapes in front of me. I could stumble blind across these rocks, the edges of these precipices, without fear of missing my step and plummeting down to sea. Besides, I have always considered that if one is to fall, it is critical to keep one's eyes firmly open.

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.

Figure 1: Three different possibilities for the opening scene of *Dear Esther*.[1]

When it is viewed as an interactive story instead of a game, *Dear Esther* is clearly what

Robert Scholes refers to as an anti-narrative. According to Scholes, an anti-narrative is a

story (a narrative medium describing a set of events, with a specific structure and human subject

matter) whose function "is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation."[2]

The many contradictions present in *Esther*'s story support this classification. For example, the

narrator states that Donnelly, an explorer who originally discovered and charted the island, never

entered the caves; yet, when the player discovers the multitude of luminescent paintings the

caves contain, the narrator wonders if he created them, or Donnelly did (see Fig. 2 on p. 4). In

addition, at several different points in the game, the narrator angrily accuses Paul of being drunk

and causing the car accident that killed Esther; yet, at other times, the narrator seems apologetic

when writing about Paul, even stating that the accident was not his fault and sympathizing with

his alleged alcoholism (see Fig. 3 and 4 on pp. 5-6). Making matters even more confusing, the

narrator seems to use the different characters (Paul, the hermit, Jakobson, and Donnelly) almost

interchangeably (see Fig. 5 on p. 6).

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[1] Full text in pictures:
    Dear Esther. The morning after I was washed ashore, salt in my ears, sand in my mouth and the waves always at my ankles, I felt as though everything had conspired to this one last shipwreck. I remembered nothing but water, stones in my belly and my shoes threatening to drag me under to where only the most listless of creatures swim.
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[2] Robert Scholes, *Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
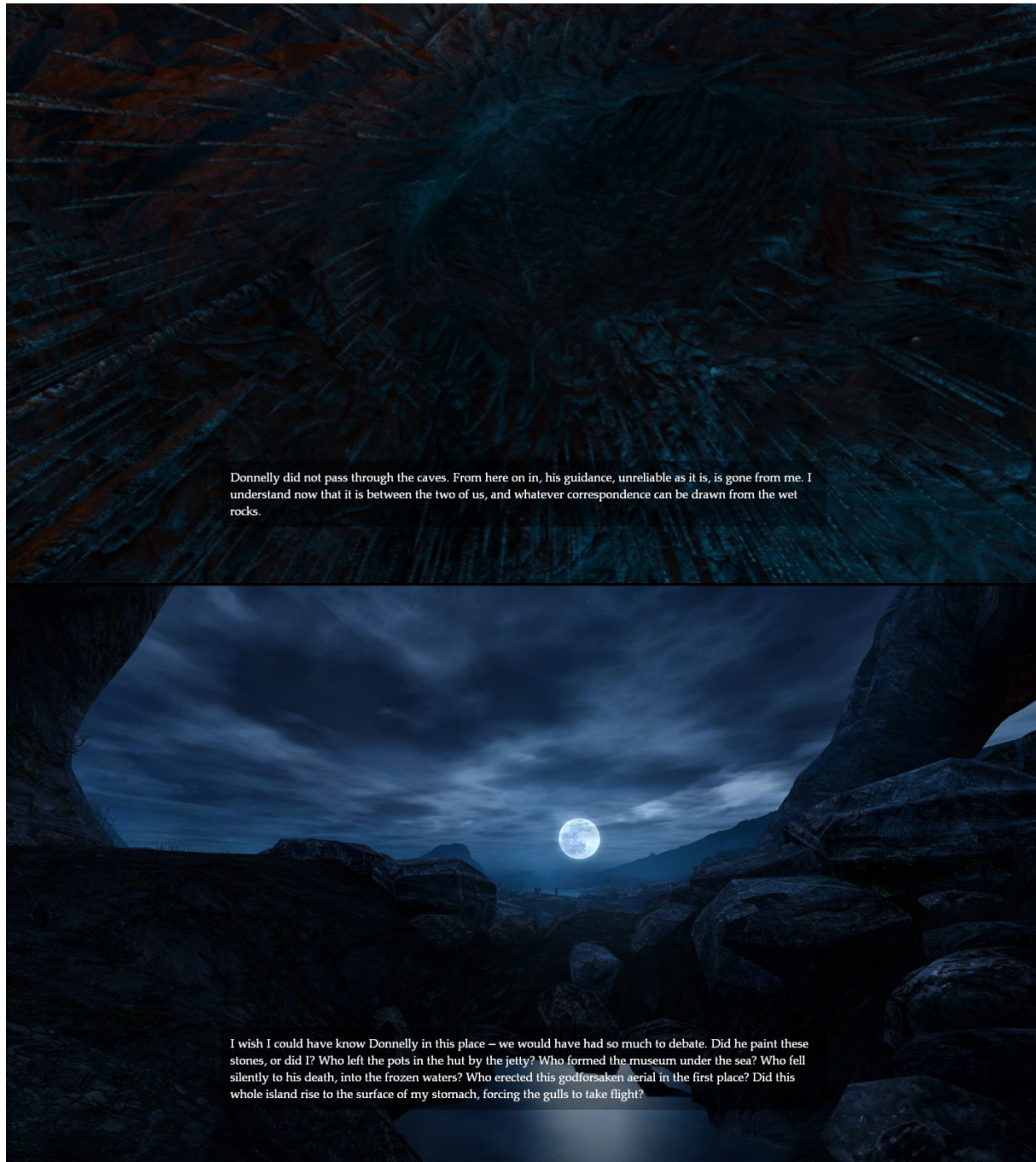
Donnelly did not pass through the caves. From here on in, his guidance, unreliable as it is, is gone from me. I understand now that it is between the two of us, and whatever correspondence can be drawn from the wet rocks.

I wish I could have know Donnelly in this place – we would have had so much to debate. Did he paint these stones, or did I? Who left the pots in the hut by the jetty? Who formed the museum under the sea? Who fell silently to his death, into the frozen waters? Who erected this godforsaken aerial in the first place? Did this whole island rise to the surface of my stomach, forcing the gulls to take flight?

Figure 2: The narrator self-contradicts himself concerning Donnelly, confusing the player.[3]

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[3] Full text in pictures:

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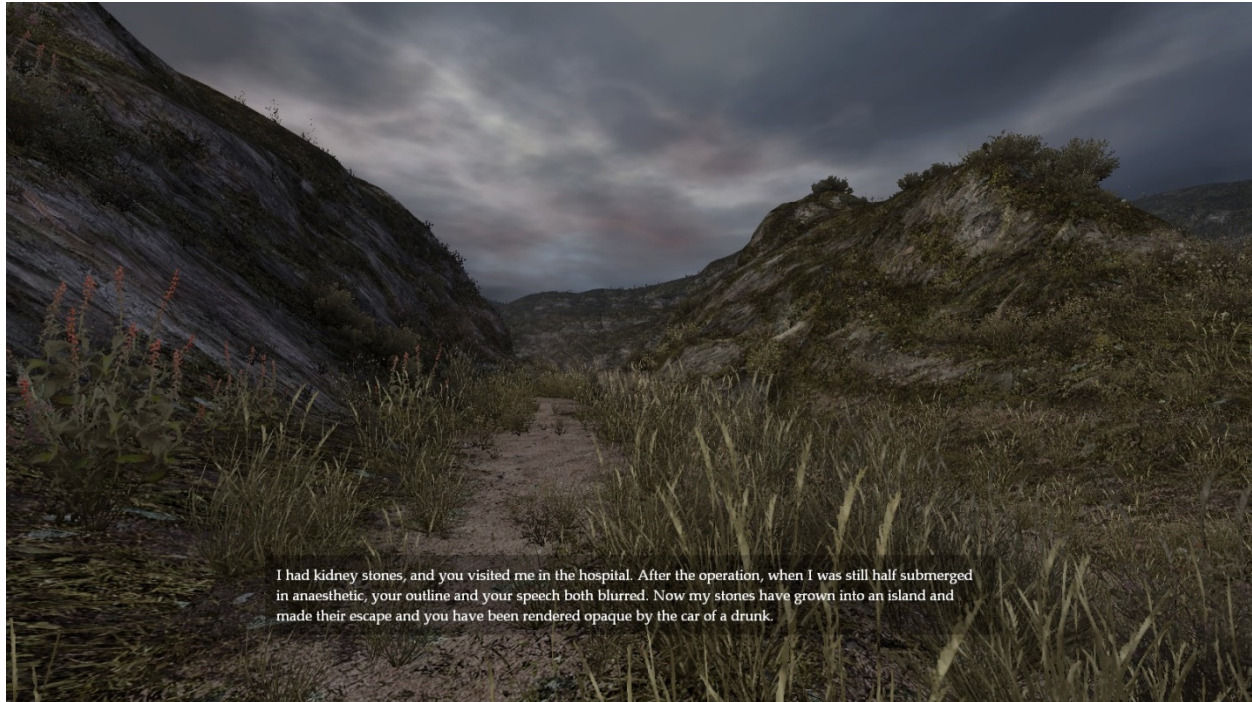
I had kidney stones, and you visited me in the hospital. After the operation, when I was still half submerged in anaesthetic, your outline and your speech both blurred. Now my stones have grown into an island and made their escape and you have been rendered opaque by the car of a drunk.

Figure 3: The line "rendered opaque by the car of a drunk," referring to Esther's death at the hands of a drunk driver, is spoken with palpable bitterness here.[4]

What to make of Donnelly? The laudanum and the syphilis? It is clearly not how he began, but I have been unable to discover if the former was a result of his visiting the island or the force that drove him here. For the syphilis, a drunk driver smashing his insides into a pulp as he stumbled these paths, I can only offer my empathy. We are all victims of our age. My disease is the internal combustion engine and the cheap fermentation of yeast.

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[4] Full text in picture:

       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 up into an island and made their escape and you have been rendered opaque by the car of a drunk.

Figure 4: The narrator seems sympathetic toward drunk drivers, stating in strangely vague terms that he suffers from the "disease" himself.[5]
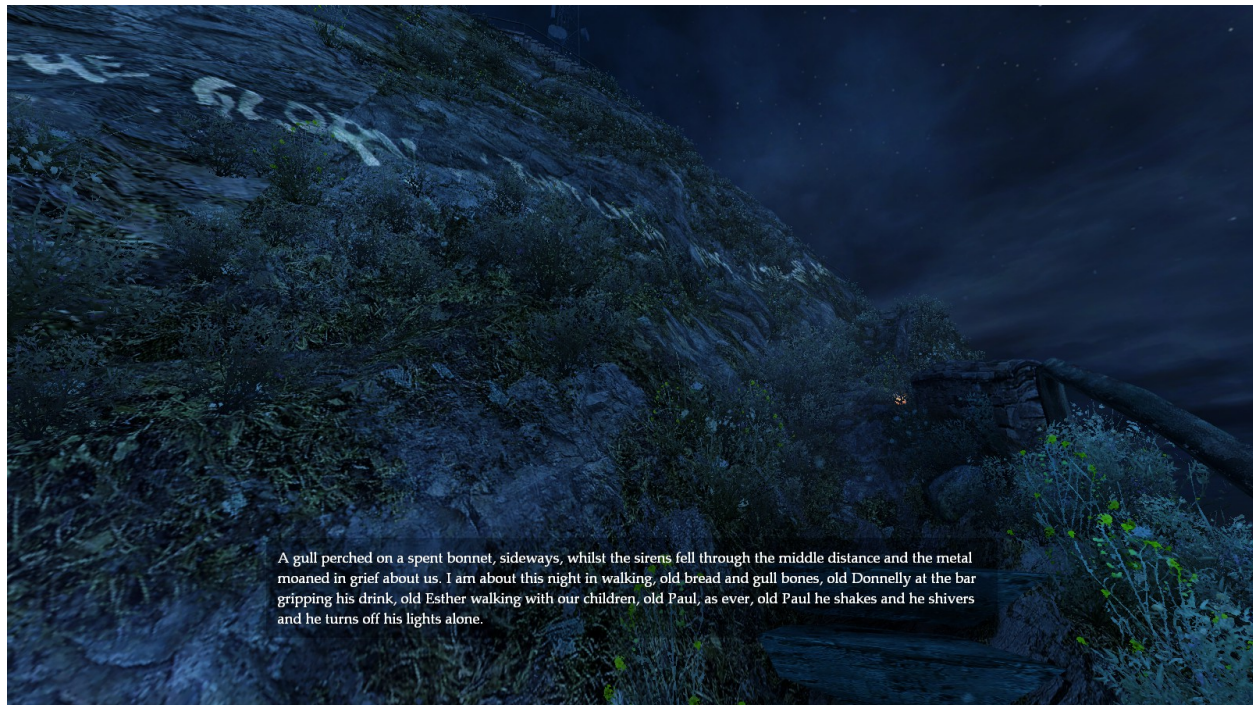

A gull perched on a spent bonnet, sideways, whilst the sirens fell through the middle distance and the metal moaned in grief about us. I am about this night in walking, old bread and gull bones, old Donnelly at the bar gripping his drink, old Esther walking with our children, old Paul, as ever, old Paul he shakes and he shivers and he turns off his lights alone.

Figure 5: A narration near the conclusion of *Dear Esther* seems to suggest that Donnelly, Paul, and the narrator are all somehow related.[6]

While the trope of an unreliable narrator is fairly common in literature, the ambiguity the technique creates in *Esther* is so excessive that it renders a unified interpretation of the story nearly impossible. Scholes, when discussing the purpose of anti-narrative, states that breaking out of the conventional structures of narrative is "a necessary prelude to any improvement in the

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[5] Full text in picture:

      What to make of Donnelly? The laudanum and the syphilis? It is clearly not how he began, but I have been unable to discover if the former was the result of his visiting the island or the force that drove him here. For the syphilis, a drunk driver smashing his insides to a pulp as he stumbled these paths, I can only offer my empathy. We are all victims of our age. My disease is the internal combustion engine and the cheap fermentation of yeast.

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human situation" (Scholes 212). Thus, by rejecting the traditional elements and techniques found

in video games, *Dear Esther* challenges and improves upon the medium itself by helping it reach

new heights.

        Similarly, Pinchbeck and Briscoe's approach to game design can be seen as an antithesis

to the theory posited by Grahame Weinbren: namely, that video games are, at their essence, an

unending progression towards mastery.[7] *Dear Esther*, unlike the video games available when

Weinbren published his article in 1995, has almost no mechanics or skills for the player to

master. In fact, the only "challenge" the game provides is avoiding falling down cliffs or

drowning, which, provided the player is experienced in first-person video games, isn't very

demanding. However, there is still a kind of mastery to *Esther*: the player must attempt to master

the game's world, not by defeating it, but by extracting his or her own meaning from the game's

story. The game does its best to make this difficult, but when it is observed with a bit of

creativity, an attentive player can manufacture a scenario in which all of the story's

contradictions make sense. The player could plausibly argue that the narrator constantly

compares and confuses the hermit, Jakobson, Donnelly, Paul, and himself because they are all

the same person. When Esther died in a car crash that he caused, the narrator was so traumatized

by guilt that his personality split into Paul, the drunk driver; Donnelly, the explorer driven so

mad by his afflictions (alcoholism, drug addiction, kidney stones, an injured leg) that he created

his own mental prison (the island); Jakobson/the hermit, an actualization of his inner desire to

shut out the world and reside in solitude, yet also doomed to die alone and forgotten; and the

voice in which he writes the letters: intelligent, pompous, almost cruel, yet denying all his own

failings.

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[7] Grahame String Weinbren, *Mastery: Computer Games, Intuitive Interfaces, and Interactive Multimedia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

Dear Esther is a confusing and enigmatic game, but it is also a remarkable achievement.

It is unlike every other video game that has preceded it in both its concept and its execution.

Pinchbeck and Briscoe, who made bold decisions with the design and risked losing a large part

of their target audience by removing all traditional game elements, have created a modern

masterpiece whose beauty is contained in its inherent contradictions: game and not game,

narrative and anti-narrative, mastery and the lack thereof. To quote from *Dear Esther*'s own

script:

> The distinction now seems mundane; why not everything and all at once! There's nothing
>
> better to do here than indulge in contradictions, whilst waiting for the fabric of life to
>
> unravel.