

Why Dear Esther is a game and why that doesn't matter in the slightest

Abstract **EU**

2012ko otsailean *Dear Esther* argitaratu zen. 2007an *source mod* eran jarri zuten esperimentu bezala lehen pertsonan gertatzen den istorio bati buruzko bideo jokoa da hau. Hala ere, askotan eztabaidatu da joko bat den ala ez. Artikulu honetan aurkako argudioak aztertzen dira, eta denek huts egiten dutela ondorioztatzen da gero, *Dear Esther* eta azken urteetako bideo joko nagusiak konparatzen direnean. Izan ere, jokoen eta joko ez direnen arteko ohiko dialektika teorikoa erredundantea da; ondorioz, *Dear Esther* ohiko joko diseinuaren aurrerabide logikotzat hartu behar da. Azken hamarkadan bideojokoen arloa noraino iritsi den ikusteko ere balio dezake.

Abstract **ES**

Dear Esther, un juego que cuenta una historia en primera persona que se publicó como prueba en *source mod* en 2007, ha visto la luz en febrero de 2012. Muchas personas se preguntan a menudo sobre este polémico título, si de veras es un juego o no. Este artículo tiene en consideración las principales objeciones al respecto y argumenta que ninguna es válida cuando se compara con los principales videojuegos de los últimos años. Se concluye que la dialéctica teórica tradicional entre lo que es juego y lo que no, es redundante y que *Dear Esther* debería verse como una extensión lógica del diseño de juegos tradicional y como una ilustración de lo lejos que ha llegado este medio en la última década.

Abstract **FR**

Dear Esther, un jeu qui raconte une histoire à la première personne et qui a vu le jour en *source mod* expérimental en 2007, est sorti en février 2012. Son titre a souvent été sujet à controverse et beaucoup se sont demandés si on peut réellement le considérer comme un jeu ou non. Cet article tient compte des objections faites à ce propos et démontre qu'aucune n'est valide lorsque l'on compare *Dear Esther* aux autres grands noms de jeux de ces dernières années. Pour conclure, on peut dire que la dialectique théorique traditionnelle entre ce qui relève ou non du jeu est redondante et *Dear Esther* devrait plutôt être considérée à la fois comme une suite logique à la conception traditionnelle de jeu et comme une illustration de l'évolution fulgurante de ce média au long de la dernière décennie.

Abstract **EN**

February 2012 has seen the release of *Dear Esther*, a pure-story first-person game that started life as an experimental Source mod in 2007. It has often been a controversial title, with questions centering around whether or not it truly constitutes as game. This article considers the major objections to this, and argues that all of these fail when *Dear Esther* is considered alongside other major game titles of the last few years. It is concluded that the traditional theoretical dialectic between game and non-game is redundant and *Dear Esther* should rather be seen as both a logical extension to traditional game design, and an illustration of how far the medium has evolved over the last decade.



In February 2012, we release our first commercial game, *Dear Esther*. Over the last month, it has been assessed as part of the jurying process of the 2012 Independent Games Festival awards. It started filtering back to me that it was becoming something of a controversial title, firing up that age-old debate: is this a game? And secondary to that: Does it matter whether it's a game or not?

A quick introduction. *Dear Esther* is a PC, first-person game that started as an experimental mod back in 2007, and has been redeveloped over the last two years for commercial release. It ditches traditional gameplay loops in favor of a pure-story experience: you can explore a space and by doing so, you trigger events, normally audio files, which deliver a story to you. The story fragments are semi-randomised, each drawn from a bank of four potential options, so each playthrough shifts in meaning and interpretation. On top of this, the story is deeply abstract, poetic and frequently contradictory, designed to prohibit any single reading of events. This abstraction continues into the environment, which is laced with ambiguous symbolism and randomly generated objects which create new influences on the interpretation of the narrative. The resulting experience is dark, deep and has resonated with a wide gaming public—the original mod has been downloaded over 100,000 times, with a dedicated cult fanbase.

Even back in 2007, some people objected to its very classification as a game, and it's somewhat surprising to see similar arguments resurface four years later. The criticisms tend to rotate around three central points. Firstly, *Dear Esther* is not a game because it lacks gameplay. It's difficult to define what is meant by that, but the traditional working definitions usually refer to loops of repetitive action that require some skill (either mental or dexterous) to engage with. Secondly, *Dear Esther* is not a game because the level of interactivity is so low, and the world is unresponsive to this interactivity. Finally, that whilst *Dear Esther* may indeed be a game, it is a poor game because it

could easily be remediated to another, more suitable medium, such as film or book. This is quite different in character to the first two arguments, which accept *Dear Esther* as a work of interactive film, fiction or art (opinions vary) quite happily, and do not critique its quality or suitability, just its definitional status.

The notion of looping gameplay, whether derived from Bungie's famous "30 seconds of fun" or academic theories of rules, systems and mechanics, is fundamentally driven by the idea that games are primarily defined by pragmatic, feedback-driven interaction loops. In other words, a player manipulates the state of a system in a number of predetermined ways, and these are repeated so the player may apply a level of skill. This is certainly the historical case: whether digital or not, a classic rule-derived game presents a pattern that may be configured in a number of ways, some of which are advantageous. Just as the chess master is skillful because of their ability to predict and manipulate patterns, so an FPS (First Person Shooter) player is skillful because they can predict and manipulate system patterns via a more complex representational interface. Of course, this representational interface is what changes everything, and the history of digital games is in many ways a history of it becoming ever more expansive. The increase in complexity of the representational interface accelerates the process of emergence inherent in most game systems. The idea that game systems are emergent is an old one, but as it is true for the huge numbers of pattern variations inherent in a game of chess, so it is true for the interpretative possibilities of the representational interface.

In other words, if the rules of a game create an emergent space, so the representations create an equal rich experiential space. Critically, this experiential space then impacts upon the way in which a player engages with the more mechanical loops of interaction by adjusting their interpretative framing. Understanding how the representational interface may be used to manipulate the overall experience has



formed a significant part of the development of game design over the last two decades, and is accelerated by the increases in representational technologies. For example, consider Alyx Vance, the core NPC (Now Player Character) of the *Half Life 2* series. Whilst driving with Alyx during Episode 2, it is possible to glance over and catch her looking romantically at the avatar, then quickly looking away, embarrassed to be caught staring. There is little interaction in terms of traditional gameplay occurring here, but it influences the way in which Alyx is likely to be thought of by the player. If a deeper, more complex relationship is interpreted, and the player comes to care more for Alyx as more than just a mechanical object (who fights alongside them), the experiential space of *Half Life 2* has changed. It is entirely possible that a player investing in NPCs more heavily will change their responses to gameplay loops (for example, changing their combat strategy to protect Alyx). In fact, it is exactly this kind of influence upon gameplay loops that drives games such as *Mass Effect* or *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, where non mechanical choices directly affect what loops are likely to be adopted, or even made available. The decision to play with non-lethal force in *DX:HR*, for example, creates a huge division in available loops and how they function, but is created and supported primarily by social relationships with NPCs. Given this, it is false to divide mechanical gameplay from experiential orchestration –both are components in creating the experience. The argument that *Dear Esther* is not a game because it does not include skill-based loops fails because it assumes that this is the only defining feature of a game, and if that argument is followed, then it disregards the representational aspect of game design. It means that logically one must consider sequences like *Ghosts in Metro2033* (along with all of the stations), *Uncharted 2*'s Tibetan village level or, indeed, free-roaming in *Red Dead Redemption* or *Assassin's Creed* as non-game sections that happen to be included in a game. This clearly makes no sense.

The second argument is equally problematic. Lack of interaction (and attached to this, lack of meaningful system response to interaction) implicitly suggests a hierarchy based upon bandwidth. According to this argument, *Dear Esther* is not a game because all you can do is move around the environment and look at objects. This gives the player two means of interacting with the system. Firstly, they can shift their avatar's location, and secondly, they can adjust the field-of-vision. Again, if this argument is logically pursued, then we are forced to conclude that *Dear Esther* is more of a game than most early arcade titles. In *Space Invaders*, for example, movement is limited to two directions along a single axis. *Dear Esther* offers four directional movement along a single axis. *Space Invaders* does not offer any opportunity to adjust the field-of-view, in *Dear Esther* this is unrestricted. The same holds if we consider it against contemporary indie hits like *VVVVV*.

Clearly, the argument is not quite this. Rather, it would seem to fall upon the significance of the interaction and the responsiveness of the system to this interaction. *Space Invaders*, for example, offers a type of interaction *Dear Esther* does not: it is possible to remove objects from play (by shooting them) and it has a condition attached that it is possible to be removed from play by failing to interact appropriately (being shot). In other words, interaction is fundamentally tied to the mechanical loops of play presented in the first argument, but here the response to this comes back into play. After all, there is a simple but direct consequence of failing to interact with *Dear Esther's* –in order to complete the game, the player has to move forwards through the environment. Conceptually, this is similar to *VVVVV*. where the bandwidth for interaction is minimal (move left, move right, change gravity) and the player must continue to move forwards to complete the game. Of course, the player can play badly –the game is notoriously difficult– but it is entirely feasible to play *Dear Esther* badly by failing to follow the required actions (you can also drown and fall off cliffs in

Dear Esther). The difference in the two games is rather one of focus and challenge, than a conceptual incompatibility. *VVVVVV*, like *Space Invaders*, focuses upon dextrous skill in a simple representational space. *Dear Esther* exists at the far end of this spectrum, with a highly complex representational space and a simple set of dextrous requirements. But to say one is more complex in terms of required interaction is clearly false.

On both counts, then, the idea of structurally distinguishing between a game and not-a-game are riddled with logical problems, and it is clear the arguments are based more upon a kind of cultural territoriality than any clear boundaries. This brings us to the third argument, that *Dear Esther* is really just a piece of interactive art or fiction, or would be better realized as a film or even a book. There are two things to consider here. Firstly, something happens in *Dear Esther* that makes it fundamentally different to films: the player is embodied in the space via an avatar, and has temporal and spatial control over how the representation unfolds. This is critical to the designed experience. Secondly, the notion of an interactive fiction is relatively meaningless when one stops to consider it. Most games contain a fiction, and in most cases, the fiction plays out regardless of player actions and choices. Academically, the idea of a player generating a story through their activities is a theoretical possibility (resting on the assumption of narrative psychology) – «I went here, then I did that» – but when we consider this sensibly, although we may be constructing a sequence of events, in narrative terms its content is stunted to the point of meaninglessness. A true interactive fiction is one where the architecture of the narrative is significantly affected by player action, and this is no more true for *Dear Esther* than it is for *Assassin's Creed*. Equally, the concept of interactive art is predicated on nothing more than the social agreement that something is art, and again the requirement that the structure of the artwork is non-trivially altered by the actions of the viewer. But it is the social agreement that is really at the heart of the matter.

Although these arguments about what constitute a game are deeply flawed, what they communicate is a generalist understanding of what a game ought to feel like – an experiential, social conceptualization that derives from a more prototypic classification system. The games we feel most comfortable describing as games are those that feel least like other media forms. *VVVVVV* is nothing like a film, book, or traditional artwork. For the last few decades, this rough idea has served us well, even if it cannot be substantiated academically or even intellectually. But things have changed, and this is because games have changed. The fact that the debate is happening again should be seen as an opportunity. Taking these arguments apart tells us much about what is currently happening in games, and exposes a reality that is more celebratory than divisive and territorial.

To put this simply, games as a medium are now massively diverse and fully integrated into wider culture. Rather than borrowing from other media, games are driving their own evolution. At the same time, the old arguments about games needing to develop, mature, evolve, are clearly redundant and based on a reductive view of games that tries to damn the entire spectrum by using a minimal, unrepresentative number of examples. This is not to criticize those examples either – personally, I see no problem with mainstream games that offer pure escapism and count them amongst my favourite media experiences – but to recognize that, particularly as we continue the indie explosion, a vast array of experiences are now on offer. That the medium can count titles like *Dinner Date*, *Dark Room Sex Game* and *Strange Rain* alongside *Rage*, *FIFA* and *L.A. Noire* is something to absolutely celebrate, it is proof that games are a rich and diverse spectrum of media. Rather than debating whether or not *Dear Esther* is a game, we should focus on the quality of the experience it offers, and celebrate the fact that we work in a medium where even such an uncompromisingly experimental title can reach a mass audience. Not many mediums can boast this.

