‘You Were all the World like a Beach to me’

The Use of Second Person Address to Create Multiple Storyworlds in Literary Video Games: ‘Dear Esther’, a Case Study

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ABSTRACT – This paper focuses on the problematic overlapping uses of ‘you’ within the video game *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) and how this gives rise to an uneasy and personalised experience rather than a fixed canonical reading. *Dear Esther* is a Walking Simulator and this type of video game is concerned with telling a story and not the conventional binary win or lose outcome of many other video games. The simple game mechanics reliant upon the player moving around a simulated space in order to learn the story means that a literary analysis is better suited to understanding the transmedia story worlds. Literary fiction uses multiple varieties of second person address to create story worlds, Walking Simulators encourage players to actively identify themselves not with but *as* the main story protagonist, and the use of second person address largely drives this identification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Text adventure games of the 1970s, some of the earliest video games, told participants, “You are standing at the end of a road”, or “You are inside a building” (Crowther 1976, my emphasis). These stories, unlike novels, position the reader within the onscreen game as an apparently active participant of the storyworld with the use of second person address. Video games have continued to encourage participants to identify themselves not with but *as* the main protagonist. The use of second person address largely drives this identification. This can be seen in particular within the genre of Walking Simulator video games, also called ‘literary video games’ and ‘liter-

ary auteur games' by Astrid Ensslin (Ensslin 2014). For Ensslin literary video games cross the boundaries between "digital books that can be played and digital games that can be read" (Ensslin 2014, 1). The central aspect here is the digital nature of the literary video games. Ensslin calls these games a 'hybrid subgroup', but I would go further than this because of the increasing interest and the number of industry awards that Walking Simulators have amassed over the past decade. Walking Simulators are a wholly new genre of digital entertainment that offer unique opportunities and experiences for both developers and participants. Walking Simulators are games that do not demand their players to be 'gamers' with extensive experience and skills gained from many hours of intense play with First Person Shooter type games. Instead, Walking Simulators demand simple mouse and keyboard skills that most people can master, or already possess.

Walking Simulators are also not interactive novels because they offer a digital environment familiar to anyone who has played, or watched someone else play a video game. This new genre of games draws upon traditional literary techniques alongside simple game mechanics of free movement around a virtual world where a story unfolds for the participant. Ensslin's definition for a literary video game is that "literariness in the sense of linguistic foregrounding is part of the authorial intention and where human language (spoken or written) plays a significant aesthetic role" (Ensslin 2014, 2).

The Chinese Room's 2012 game, *Dear Esther*, is taken here as an example of literary video games. It tells the story of an unnamed male protagonist whose wife, Esther, has died, killed in a car crash somewhere on the M5 between Exeter and Bristol. The game is set on an uninhabited Hebridean island where the protagonist has come to remember his past with Esther as this was a favourite destination of theirs. *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. Unable to pick up any items, participating in the game is limited to wandering around the island with a First-person view, each explored area provides a new fragment of the narrative which both appears onscreen and is heard in a voiceover from the unnamed protagonist. The island is explored via pathways that the participant chooses to take, this then gives the illusion of choice and the text appearing to be accessed in any order, but in fact the choice is limited; the text fragments are randomly organised so that each time the game is played different elements of the story will be revealed. Dan

Pinchbeck, the author of *Dear Esther* wrote four different scripts (2013) and each of these can only be accessed with repeated participation in the game. The island is hilly with the pathways leading ultimately to its peak, thus providing a broadly linear reading of the text fragments. There are various loops that can be taken that will provide additional information, but it is possible to reach the end of the story – the radio mast at the top of the island – without having explored all the pathways. The structure of the story is fragmented from the narrator's version of events as he becomes ill during the journey to the top of the island and this causes additional confusion and unreliability based upon his lack of lucidity. These multiple ambiguous threads that remain unsolved provide a personal reading for each participant that may be revised upon further explorations.

'You' is used frequently throughout *Dear Esther* and for multiple purposes that can be considered both through literary and video game conventions. David Herman says that 'narrative you' in literary texts gives rise to a "fitful and self-conscious anchoring of the text in its contexts, as well as a storyworld whose contours and boundaries can be probabilistically but not determinately mapped, the inventory of its constituent entities remaining fuzzy rather than fixed" (Herman 2004, 332). Bruce Morrissette previously suggested that "Narrative 'you' generates a complex series of perspectives whose multiple angles deserve to be explored" (Morrissette, 1965, 2). Whether we call them 'multiple angles' or 'fuzzy' contours, we can be sure that second person address is problematic and lends itself to personal readings rather than a canonic one.

Interest in the use of second person address within literature has grown since Morrissette's 1965 article and this paper draws upon work from Monika Fludernik (1993, 1994, 2014), and David Herman (1994, 2004, 2009). There has also been a growing discussion on the use of the second person address in digital storytelling which has informed this paper, particularly the work of Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, (2011, 2012), as well as Jill Walker (2000). In *Dear Esther* literary narrative device sits alongside video game convention and gives rise to an uneasy transmedial form of storytelling that requires participants to be both reader and player simultaneously. It is because of this dual identity that the term 'participant' has generally been used in place of 'player' or 'reader' where appropriate.

This paper intends to begin a process of mapping and fixing the narrative *you* within the game, *Dear Esther*, by using close stylistic analysis as suggested by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, et al, in their *[S]creed for Digital*

Fiction (2010); a 'platform of critical principles' based upon systematic close analysis of language to reveal meaning in digital fiction and place it squarely within literary study. The *[S]creed* was designed with literary studies in mind, and this makes their approach ideally suited for *Dear Esther* because of its transmedial readerly qualities. This is placed alongside Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible World Theory (1991, 1992, 2009, 2013), to establish the meta world of *Dear Esther* which then allows some defining of the narrative and characters in their various worlds, and thus make further sense of referential addresses throughout the narrative.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this paper was based upon *ludostylistics* as identified by Astrid Ensslin and described as, "an analytical toolset...which integrates elements of narratology, poetics/stylistics, semiotics, mediality, and ludology" (2014, 50). Ensslin proposes that 'literary auteur games' (2014, 142), because of their transmedial nature, require analysis derived from literary theory. *Dear Esther*'s strongly anti-ludic attributes of slow movement and lack of the conventional video game win/lose binary shifts the player to focus to what remains, the story, demonstrating the necessity of a literary rather than game-centred approach. However, unlike a literary text where the reader may identify with the protagonist but always remains an observer, video games have long promised the experience of *being* the protagonist, to be as Janet H. Murray described in *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* participants "in stories that change around them in response to their actions" (1998, 15). *Dear Esther* is not just a short story told in text fragments where we might observe the slow breakdown of the male protagonist; the positioning of the participant in video games, 'you', demands an overlapping identification as the participant virtually become the protagonist, yet simultaneously observe and attempt to make sense of the multiple uses of 'you'.

Walking Simulators uniquely offer two overlapping worlds for participants: gameworld, and storyworld. The gameworld is that of coding, video game conventions, and the onscreen experience that involves navigating a virtual space providing the setting for the unfolding narrative. The gameworld of *Dear Esther* provides what Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä describe as "sensory immersion … Large screens close to [the] player's face and powerful sounds easily overpower the sensory information coming from the

real world, and the player becomes entirely focused on the game world and its stimuli." (2005, 7) We are provided with sounds and images onscreen that overpower that of the real world around us, and we are given to believe that we have agency within this onscreen world via the controller we hold in our real world. The storyworld of a Walking Simulator is the same as the possible worlds of fiction, and therefore Marie-Laure Ryan's work on Possible World and Story World theory alongside Joanna Gavins' work on Text World Theory (2007) has been employed to map the various worlds that the game encompasses and where each of the iterations of 'you' are and a basic world diagram was created. This paper is concerned mainly with the literary use of the second person address, and thus uses a broadly literary approach to the analysis of *Dear Esther*. However, the use of 'you' as a video game convention cannot be overlooked. The entire text fragments of the game were transcribed and analysed as literary artefacts set within the gameworld of a simulated Hebridean island.

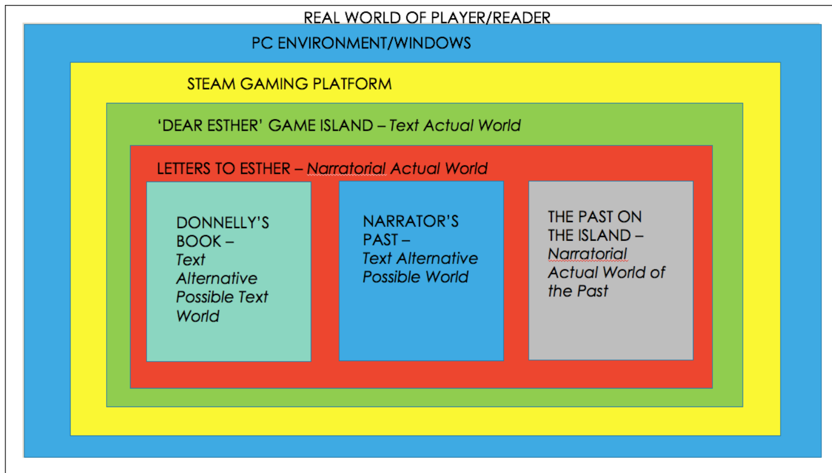

Figure 1. The World Diagram of Dear Esther

3. Analysis

3.1. The function of the second person pronoun in Dear Esther's gameworld

Jill Walker writing in *The Cybertext Yearbook 2000* explains that using "'you' 'explicitly writes a narratee into the text" (2009, 9); the author (of text or game) addresses you directly so 'you', the reader or player now exist within the text or game world. As Walker explains, once 'you' are within the text or game world you now have a role to fill that enables the game to begin. The story of *Dear Esther* cannot begin until 'you' have begun to play; unlike a printed text the video game cannot be opened at any point, printed out, or read aloud, instead each participant must begin the story within the gameworld, at the shoreline of the unnamed Hebridean island. Each new play of the game may lead to new fragments of the story and thus a deeper understanding of the overall narrative, or greater confusion as additional ambiguous threads are added. The use of 'you' in the conventional video game context is to place the participant at the centre of the onscreen actions and to aid their deictic shift from reality into the gameworld. George Lakoff describes *deixis* as being a necessary cognitive sensory process that enables us to define reality (1999, 17), and thus with video games the shift we experience is a gradual descent into the gameworld that is created by the materiality of technology. In the case of *Dear Esther* played within the Steam PC environment the participant must switch on the PC and monitor, access Steam by clicking a mouse button, select the library, choose the game, click start, and finally the shoreline of the gameworld will appear. Interestingly, in *Dear Esther* 'you' as gameworld participant, or player, is not explicitly addressed. This game does not direct 'you' to buttons that must be clicked, or puzzles to be solved. 'You' as player in *Dear Esther* is implicit and part of the conventional video game contract - the view provided throughout the gameplay is first person, 'you' are moving around the island, 'you' are choosing where to explore.

Dear Esther provides the opportunity for participants to carry out simple conventional explorational gameplay within the boundaries of the Hebridean island gameworld. Gameplay is undemanding and gives rise to an almost meditative state which then allows participants to engage with the storyworld provided. Rosa Carbo-Mascarell's 2016 article on Walking

Simulators outlines how *Dear Esther*'s "hidden stories seem to have manifested as metaphorical landscape. I, the explorer, take on the occult practice and search to uncover the secrets of the narrator, manifested as environment" (2016, 7). The slow gameplay encourages a further cognitive deictic shift from the island into the storyworld and its 'metaphorical landscape'. Once in the storyworld, the use of second person address becomes multiple, ambiguous, and problematic.

The use of a second person address in fiction situates the reader within the storyworld, Fludernik explains, "If there is address, there must be an addressor, an I (implicit or explicit), and hence a narrator, and this narrator can be a mere enunciator or also a protagonist sharing the you's fictional existence on the story level" (1993, 219). In *Dear Esther* the 'I' is the male voiced narrator whose part the participant takes in traversing the game's island. However, as part of the plot the narrator is unreliable and his character and consciousness becomes confused and confusing. Using Fludernik's basic narratology framework, based upon Gerard Genette's concepts (1983), it is possible to determine that the story is at times both *homodiegetic* (narrator taking part in the events he narrates) and *heterodiegetic* (narrator not appearing in the events narrated) as the narrator and narrative becomes more fractured. The use of the second person address is a deliberately subversive ploy, according to Fludernik,

> The interesting subversive effects of much second person fiction derive from a concentration of text on the communicative level, accompanied by deliberate ambiguity about the existential circumstances of the 'interlocutors' and a refusal to provide a diegetic function of the narrator. (1993, 229)

This is exactly what *Dear Esther*'s text does - there are several letters from the narrator and text fragments which are often ambiguous; it is unclear which text world events take place in, to whom, or when. The addition of the second person address confuses and destabilises.

Dear Esther has the address 'you' or 'yours' repeated 76 times throughout the entire script. Each of these uses is within the storyworld and not as an overt aid to the gameworld player, instead the participant is addressed as a reader might be within a conventional literary text. This 'you' function on two distinct levels for different purposes. For most of the time the 'you' refers to Esther – the intradiegetic addressee of the text world – our main purpose and drive for understanding or playing *Dear Esther*. Esther, as a character is part of the shared storyworld of the narrator; she

and the narrator share an existential past, but they no longer share a present, instead the narrator addresses Esther via letters. Esther is the dead wife of the narrator, and he addresses Esther to tell her not only about his current and recent past since her death, but also as a narrative device to inform the reader about their shared past. At times 'you' is a form of 'self-address' to increase immersion and empathy (Fludernik 1993, 217-247) within *Dear Esther* and thus addresses the reader in her role as the central unnamed narrator.

3.2. You as 'self-address'

The 'self-address' you, the colloquial alternative to 'one' is first introduced in the fragment, "At night you can see the lights sometimes from a passing tanker or trawler." Here the reader is drawn into the text world as an enactor in the "participatory role of Sensor" (Gavins 2007, 85). Unlike a literary text, however, *Dear Esther* provides some of this visual input as part of the gameworld, and thus the participant's roles as reader of text and player of the game are united - the text is supported by the visual realisation of the gameworld, which changes to nighttime during gameplay, although the passing lights from shipping are not visible. The reader as visual Sensor within the fictional domain of the island may allow an easier transition from reality into the immersive video game world.

Figure 2. Night time in the game world. Screenshot of Dear Esther by The Chinese Room, http://www.dear-esther.com.

Gavins suggests that this use of the second person address in this sensory way as identification with the protagonist "might even minimise the ontological divide between this real-world situation and the fictionality of the text-world, making the breakdown of this barrier seem less problematic" (2007, 86). Certainly, by providing some of the setting, or empty stage, within the gameworld, participants may then more easily imagine the suggestions of the storyworld. (Figure 2).

This uniting function of 'you' within the gameworld and storyworld also reinforces the setting as a fictional element that is (at this point) reliable; the narrator has not yet become delusional and the information offered is possible within the life experiences of many players as it is an island, but also this echoes John Donne's 1624 metaphor in *Meditation 17*, "No man is an island". This is particularly effective in implicating the reader: "[t]he closer the resemblance between the life of the text-world enactor and the life of the real-world reader, the more likely it is that the reader will be comfortable inhabiting the new projected text-world persona." (Gavins 2007, 86). Likewise, the participant is encouraged to identify with the narrator in his letter to Esther describing his past text world revising the scene of the accident which killed her.

> Dear Esther. I have now driven the stretch of the M5 between Exeter and Bristol over twenty-one times, but although I have all the reports and all the witnesses and have cross-referenced them within a millimetre using my ordnance survey maps, I simply cannot find the location. You'd think there would be marks, to serve as some evidence. (The Chinese Room 2013)

By including the colloquial 'you'd' the narrator is making a rhetorical address to the implied reader, Esther. However, in this fragment Esther is not the narratee, unlike later fragments discussed below. This 'you' also serves to function as an implicit identification with the narrator for the participant who will already have created the textual alternative possible world of the narrator's past with the mention of real roads (M5), and places (Exeter and Bristol). The inclusion of actual world features helps the reader/player with the ontological divide inherent in fiction - we can believe the fiction if it offers a reality that matches our own.

In the final quarter of the game, on the approach to the beacon at the summit of the island, the self-address 'you' is repeated, "You could hear the sirens above the idling traffic." Here 'you' is placed into the past text world

of Esther and the unnamed narrator in the moments after the accident which killed Esther. Again, this functions as a tethering point for the reader; there is an implicit identification with the narrator which is sensory but this time auditory.

There is a considerable body of research starting in 1990 (Sisson) which suggests that auditory function is the final sense left in coma patients. This would give weight to two possibilities here; 'you' is Esther, trapped in the crashed car of the past text world, unconscious, or 'you' is the narrator who is, at this point in the active text world perhaps delirious or unconscious after suffering a broken leg. Although as reader the participant is aware of the broken leg, as player we never see our protagonist, the gameworld does not provide any visual confirmation. The gameworld does, however, show a strange dreamlike underwater image of a wrecked motorway with a hospital trolley. The storyworld suggests an accident, but it is the gameworld that provides the participant with the unifying image.

Figure 3. Dreamlike underwater image of a wrecked motorway, concept art of Dear Esther by Ben Andrews, http://www.dear-esther.com.

3.3. Esther as narratee

Dear Esther is a ghost story and as such the character of Esther remains objectified throughout; she is an unseen character with no active part in the narrative other than that of the narrator's dead wife. The narratee, for Fludernik, is the "intrafictional addressee of the narrator's discourse" (2009, 23). Esther is the narratee who is 'offstage' for much of the text, but also is a character in the textual possible worlds of the past as described by the unnamed narrator. Within the textual possible worlds Esther appears in a variety of guises; as a baby, child, companion, both dead and alive. Within the gameworld Esther never appears, but the many ghost conventions of shadowy figures, flickering candles, alongside the effective use of atmospheric music and shifting light, all add to an uneasy atmosphere of a spectral Esther.

3.3.1. Esther's past

Esther is directly addressed in letter form, 'Dear Esther' in twelve fragments, so it is logical to assume that 'you' in many of the fragments refers to her as narratee and character. Early in the story Esther's past is recounted:

> When you were born, your mother told me, a hush fell over the delivery room. A great red birthmark covered the left side of your face. No one knew what to say, so you cried to fill the vacuum. I always admired you for that; that you cried to fill whatever vacuum you found. I began to manufacture vacuums, just to enable you to deploy your talent. The birthmark faded by the time you were six, and had gone completely by the time we met, but your fascination with the empty, and its cure, remained. (The Chinese Room, 2013)

In this fragment despite being the subject of the anecdote situated within the possible world of Esther's past, she is still not given narratorial status. It is Esther's mother who tells this story to the narrator, thus positioning him as narratee, albeit briefly, within this frame narrative/storyworld which extends to two sentences. Esther is relegated to the position of an entirely impotent character, almost fetishised by the narrator. This fragment appears early, but the gameworld does not provide any visual suggestion of what Esther might have looked like, instead the player wanders around the shoreline exploring the lighthouse and its sheds. Here, unlike the unifying

'you' of the self-addressed narrator and player, the participant is player wandering, and reader imagining Esther's face and her past.

Small details describing the narrator's relationship with Esther are given throughout the story adding to the textual actual possible world of their past. These everyday vignettes allow the reader to create the story world within their imagination and add a note of realism (albeit constructed by Dan Pinchbeck of The Chinese Room) which in turn encourages identification with the couple and therefore greater sympathy for the narrator's loss. Halfway through the game an inventory is presented:

> Inventory: a trestle table we spread wallpaper on in our first home. A folding chair; I laughed at you for bringing it camping in the lakes. I was uncomfortable later and you laughed then. This diary; the bed with the broken springs – once asleep, you have to remember not to dream. A change of clothes. (The Chinese Room 2013)

The items mentioned together with the direct address to Esther combine to elicit an emotional response from the reader. In this fragment, the 'you' shifts from a narratee address: "I laughed at you…you laughed then" to a rhetorical self-address in the following sentence, "you have to remember not to dream". This shift brings the reader back from the textual possible world of Esther and the narrator's shared past into the textual actual world of the narrator's present on the island where Esther is dead. This shift is achieved in the fragment by not only the change in tense from past 'laughed', then present 'have', but also the change in articles from the indefinite 'a trestle table' and '[a] folding chair' of the past to the definite '[t]his diary; the bed' of the present, and thus signalling to the participant the temporal and deictic shift to the narrator's textual actual world, his here and now. Again, this unifying use of 'you' brings together narrator and player as the storyworld collapses into the gameworld because this text is triggered on the exploration of an abandoned bothy (a traditional Scottish hut used by shepherds). This aligning of the gameworld visuals and the storyworld text allows participants to actually experience the 'dream' offered by the text and also to see the reality of the gameworld.

3.3.2. Esther and the accident

Esther is cast most strongly as narratee in the telling of the accident which killed her. The narrative is shifting and overlapping because of the four

different scripts that randomly appear in replaying and therefore demands the reader construct the story and continue to update their mental model each time. The first mention of Esther as narratee 'you' and the accident happens on one possible ascent to the radio mast. The narrator recounts the textual alternative possible world after the accident. The first sentence, after the address, does not situate the event either at the scene of the accident or in a hospital, instead the focus is on the narrator telling Esther what he did in relation to her. Esther is again fetishised and exists only because the narrator is present; "I found myself afraid you'd … I orbited you". In the second sentence she becomes more objectified: "Your hair had not been brushed yet, your make-up not reapplied." This sentence with the reinforced objectification; she has become a body not yet prepared for viewing before a funeral. The final sentence of the fragment shifts the fetishised and objectified Esther into a metaphor; she has become a beach: "You were all the world like a beach to me, laid out for investigation, your geography telling one story, but hinting at the geology hidden behind the cuts and bruises."

Following the loose chronology presented through the text more detail is given later to the accident suffered by Esther and the narrator. In this fragment there is a straightforward 'you': "As I lay pinned beside you, the ticking of the cooling engine". This allows the reader to imagine this textual alternative possible world of the accident, again as with the rhetorical self-addressing 'you' the reader is cast as sensor if there is immersion and subsequent identification with the narrator. The gameworld does not overlap here and allow any unification with the storyworld text, as player the participant continues to walk along the hillside path and imagine the noise of a cooling engine which is at odds with the gameworld's howling winds and mournful piano soundtrack.

3.3.3. Esther in the narrator's imagination

Esther as 'you' often appears within a projected world of the narrator's imagination as he processes her loss. She is cast as other figures, or in alternate possible worlds where the narrator can, of course, control the events.

Esther is projected into a possible text world by the narrator in an early fragment. He has a book with him written by 'Donnelly' some three hundred years before. His reading of Donnelly's book recounting the details of the island's hermit is mapped onto the narrator's textual alternative possible world, which Ryan describes as "textually presented as mental

constructs formed by the inhabitants of TAW [Textual actual world]" (1992, vii). This book is never visually realised within the gameworld, instead the participant must imagine this artefact as one would as a convention of reading fiction. The narrator casts Esther as the hermit who was living upon the island long ago and includes Biblical allusions to the Gospel story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

> I would leave you presents, outside your retreat, in this interim space between cliff and beach. I would leave you loaves and fishes, but the fish stocks have been depleted and I have run out of bread. I would row you back to your homeland in a bottomless boat but I fear we would both be driven mad by the chatter of the sea creatures. (The Chinese Room 2013)

In one of the first fragments the narrator explains that Donnelly's book describes the shepherds living on the island during the 18th century leaving gifts for the unseen hermit, and the narrator claims to have repeated this exercise. By conflating the hermit and Esther by the relatively early stage of the journey towards the top of the island the inherent instability of the storyworld narrative is suggested. Again, the reader is having the delusional nature of the narrator flagged within this fragment; "we would both be driven mad", the 'we' is the narrator with Esther, yet the basic premise upon which the game is founded is that Esther is not present, and indeed, the island of the gameworld is entirely uninhabited.

The narrator projects Esther into a future textual alternative possible world in a fragment which begins in his textual actual world, "Dear Esther. This will be my last letter … Why do I still post them home to you?" This suggests that the narrator still has a grasp on his reality on the island. The imagined alternative possible world the narrator projects Esther into is an impossible future, "Perhaps I can imagine myself picking them up on the return I will not make, to find you waiting with daytime television and all its comforts." This image, by its very prosaic nature, allows the reader to identify with the narrator, or at the very least to clearly picture this everyday scene. However, this fragment also suggests the traditional nature of the relationship between the narrator and Esther as she remains at home during the day watching television while the narrator is away. It could be argued that this, along with the treatment of Esther as a fetishised object gives us a clichéd patriarchal system of reality portrayed within this game which is perhaps to be expected within the current paradigm of video games.

The possible fetishisation of Esther is somewhat undercut in a later fragment where the narrator subordinates himself to her: "I will become a torch for you". This, rather like the casting of Esther as the hermit with Biblical overtones in an earlier fragment, casts her in the role of deity, or at least spiritual entity. This is echoed later still where the transition from corporeal to ethereal is made clear, and the narrator's resistance to it,

> It cannot be the landfill where the parts of your life that would not burn ended up. It cannot be the chimney that delivered you to the skies. It cannot be the place where you rained back down again to fertilise the soil and make small flowers in the rocks. (The Chinese Room 2013)

In this fragment the participant may well find it easy to project themselves into this text world if they have suffered a loss as the denial voiced here in the repeated 'It cannot' match with the five stages of loss as put forward by Kessler and Kugler-Ross (2014).

3.3.4. Esther in the textual actual world of the narrator's present

Esther's absence and death are addressed in a simple, if gruesome, description of the textual actual world of the narrator on the island,

> 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, with enough left over to thicken the air and repopulate the bay. (The Chinese Room, 2013)

In this fragment the narrator uses the present tense ('It is all sick'), yet includes Esther as an intrafictional addressee - she is 'here' with him in this time and space. However, it is also evident from this fragment that this must be a spiritual ghost presence of Esther as 'all that is left' are her 'human ashes'. Esther has become an object; she has no corporeal presence in the gameworld and exists only as a memory within the storyworld. The few fleeting mentions of the past are dominated by the accident where she is already dead. As a ghostly presence Esther addressed as 'you' is mentioned a few times in the narrator's textual actual world, and the gameworld of the island offers flickering candles and the occasional shadowy figure to suggests a collocation.

The layering which continues throughout the text is used to bring Esther into the present actual world of the narrator, "where Donnelly's boots and yours and mine still trample. I will carry a torch for you; I will leave it at the foot of my headstone. You will need it for the tunnels that carry me

under." Here Esther is possibly being depicted as a deity, "I will carry a torch for you", as someone might do in a religious ceremony, as well as the more colloquial use of this phrase meaning to still be in love with someone, particularly when it is unrequited. In this fragment we see a shift from the collocated "Donnelly's boots and yours and mine still trample" of the island where the three characters are united only in that space, yet in a persistent continuum of 'still', to the implied future of "I will carry a torch for you", which finally shifts to Esther being alone carrying the torch, "[y]ou will need it". This reinforces the notion that Esther will carry on as she is already there in spirit while the narrator is apparently alive throughout the game. Interestingly within the gameworld there is no 'trample' of the island's grass and heather, instead movement continues throughout to be a smooth gliding as if the narrator were a ghost himself. It could be the case that the developers were unable to provide a visual expression of walking across the island setting, but this is unlikely given the sophistication of the video graphics rendering, and therefore suggests that this was a sly hint that the narrator of the storyworld is in fact a ghost within the gameworld. Yet, there is an implication that the narrator is alive when he describes his fever, "I sweat for you in the small hours". The fever driven visions of a ghostly Esther in the narrator's textual actual world appear again later, "I will hold the hand you offer to me". However, Esther as dead wife, rather than ghostlike presence, is directly addressed later still where the narrator seems to let her go: "I collected all the letters I'd ever meant to send to you … I folded you into the creases and then... I consigned you to the Atlantic, and I sat here until I'd watched all of you sink." Here the gameworld overlaps with the storyworld as there are scenes of folded paper boats sitting on the shoreline, and again "you" the participant is reminded that the storyworld sits within the gameworld and that the gameworld offers fleeting glimpses of the imagined storyworld.

As the player approaches the summit of the island the text fragments suggest Esther is gone, and no longer a ghostlike figure on the island with the narrator in his textual actual world, and is reinforced by the phrase, "they will not forget you". This penultimate fragment satisfies the textual actual world of a widower mourning the loss of his wife, even if arriving at this realisation has been ambiguous and requiring careful attention to the storyworld reading. The final fragment describes his feelings towards his dead wife, and puts it into his present textual actual world, "[y]ou are all the world like a nest to me" which gives the reader something of a final

payoff and possibly a sense of completion. That said, in many respects this mixed imagery of Esther as "all the world like a nest" is, at first, an unusual one to put at the end of the text fragments as it appears only four times previously:

> "the nests, that the gulls have clearly abandoned"
> "If I were a gull, I would abandon my nest"
> "the gulls are not here to carry them back to their nests"
> "one day the gulls will return and nest in our bones"

The gameworld, however, shows a small nest containing three eggs surrounded by nine lit candles within a shed found on the final ascent allowing again the overlap with the storyworld to reinforce the imagery provided by the text, and thus leading to the inevitable climax of the game. The end of the game is reached when the first person eye-camera leaps from the top of the island's aerial and soars across the landscape like a bird. The Jungian archetype of birds being the carrier of the souls of the dead, according to Christopher Moreman (2014, 2), is a well-established metaphor within Western culture. It is unlikely to jar with the player, but instead provide a satisfying, if perhaps a little sentimental, conclusion to the game.

Figure 4. Aerial view of the island in Dear Esther, by The Chinese Room, http://www.dear-esther.com.

3.4. The hermit as narratee and narrator's imagined world

Ambiguity within the storyworld is a feature throughout *Dear Esther*, and this encourages participants as readers to construct their own personal understanding of the plot. There are references to overlapping characters as well as an ambiguity about the era when they came to the island. Early in

the gameplay, within the opening scenes at the lighthouse, the narrator in one of the possible fragments addresses the long dead hermit (referred to interchangeably as both 'Jacobson', and 'Jakobson' within the game) as a narratee within an alternative possible textual world:

> Why, asked the farmers, why asked Jakobson, why bother with your visions at all, if you are just to throw your arms up at the cliff and let it close in behind you, seal you into the belly of the island, a museum shut to all but the most devoted. (The Chinese Room 2013)

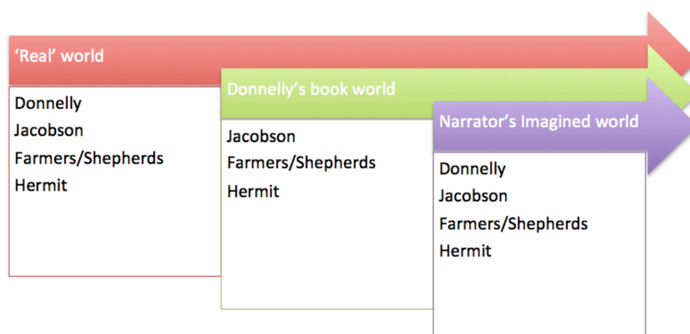

Figure 5. The characters appearing in the narrator's island world

The narrator has situated this possible anecdote not in the book written by a man called Donnelly from the past who had lived upon the island (and that the narrator has stolen from the library on his journey to the island), but instead in an alternative possible textual world created within his imagination and where the imagined farmers, alongside the imagined Jacobson, can pose these questions to an imagined hermit.

In the above diagram the 'real' world is the textual actual world - the world in which the narrator lives, the Hebridean island exists, and where Donnelly lived and wrote his book which has not been borrowed from Edinburgh library since 1974. Ryan would call this world the Textual Reference World, "The world for which the text claims facts; the world in which the propositions asserted by the text are to be valued" (1992, vii). In addition to 'you' being the hermit within the narrator's imagined world, Ryan's Textual Alternative Possible World, in this fragment it is possible to read this as a conflation of the narrator with the hermit within the narrator's own textual actual world. There is some evidence supporting this

reading in an earlier fragment where the narrator says, "I threw my arms wide and the cliff opened out before me". This also supports the ongoing instability of the text, the continued repetition of certain words and phrases, all of which contribute to the fractured narrative which invites a personal reading rather than an easily agreed and widely accepted interpretation. The game environment merely hints at the existence of a hermit as the island has some abandoned buildings and there are chemical symbols painted in fluorescent paint upon rocks and walls all over the island. These visual clues and nods towards a mysterious 'other' within the gameworld provide support for the confusing and ambiguous storyworld with its multiple overlapping threads.

4. Conclusion

Dear Esther is a ghost story and the script was written with the intention of unsettling the reader, according to its writer, Dan Pinchbeck (2013). The use of four different scripts that are used randomly each time the game is played sets the conditions for an unstable storyworld within the simple and undemanding gameworld. As player, participants are required to do little except wander and reflect upon the strangely shifting story. Within the text of the storyworld the use of the second person address contributes to the instability; the reader is aware throughout that the text world being created is inherently shifting in point of view, temporality, and possible storyworld. The reader is left with a text that demands a personal reading in which some sort of logic can be imposed upon the fragments and story strands to make sense and create a narrative. This fits in well with Espen Aarseth's (1997, 114) suggestion that adventure games feature an 'intrigant' in place of narrator, and the reader is instead the 'intriguee', left to puzzle over the narrative and thus make sense of it. In this type of literary video game the 'game' element is not that of the traditional adversarial model familiar to anyone who has played chess or *Tetris*, but instead the game is that of intellectual enquiry similar to the experience of reading a literary novel. It is not surprising that the opening scene of *Dear Esther* is upon the island shore next to a lighthouse, hinting at a literary allusion to Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) which also deals with the death of a wife and how those left behind cope. Throughout *Dear Esther* the text encourages deeper

immersion and identification through the shifting and confusing narrative threads that repeatedly invoke identification with the characters through the continued use of the second person address. The participant's gameworld experience is undemanding and often reduced to being a passive viewer. The storyworld experience is demanding and multilayered within time, text world, and characters. Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, et al. in their 2010 *A [S]creed for Digital Fiction*, outlines how participants experiencing digital fiction must be 'dually embodied' as they are users of hardware to access the story, and also 're-embodied' within the story as the implied reader. Walking Simulators like *Dear Esther* can also apply a similar understanding to the participants' experience as they are players holding a controller that allows them to explore the virtual environment of the Hebridean island on screen, and they are 're-embodied' as reader when making sense of the text fragments. Throughout *Dear Esther* the participant must act simultaneously and separately in the gameworld and in the storyworld because these two worlds exist in parallel with each other and the use of second person address pins down the participant and unites the two worlds, thus enabling touchstone moments of clarity. Second person address is a familiar video game convention, and a familiar literary device, both aimed at immersing the player or reader into the worlds presented by each medium. 'You' are not only player, 'you' are not only reader, in *Dear Esther* you are both in the dual worlds that occasionally unite.

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