

Tracks and Traces

feature Dear Esther | Cameron Hill



WIt is all sick to death: the water is too polluted for the fish, the sky is too thin for the birds and the soil is cut with the bones of hermits and shepherds. 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.”

- *Dear Esther, Chapter 1: The Lighthouse*

We are all nowadays conditioned by the knowledge of how our actions influence our environment, how we shape it and how it shapes us. Everything leaves a mark, everything touches somebody else or some other thing, and *Dear Esther* is a tapestry of these traces. It revolves around what we leave behind; on the people we encounter and places we know.

Originally a *Half-Life 2* mod, *Dear Esther* appropriated the essential perspective of a first-person shooter by removing the

genre’s usual focus on ballistics and violence. Gone are the warzones and the headshots and in are sea-worn cliff faces and an orchestral wind. Out go the barked commands and the mission objectives, in comes disorientating prose and a glacial march towards a blinking red radio tower. It was the first prominent example of games that came to be pejoratively known as ‘walking simulators’ and was quickly embroiled in what has become a well-worn debate over whether it is a game or not. Now, at a distance of over decade from its 2008 release (and commercial release in 2012), it’s still difficult to articulate the magnetism of the game when you boil it down to its basic parts. You spend each short visit wandering over a pseudo-Hebridean island, piecing together fragments of information contained in the narration and the landscape. Poetic monologues are triggered in the same place but the passages are varied with each playthrough, and so your interpretation of the events can change as the narration, as well

Previous and following pages: Dear Esther: Landmark Edition (Gareth Damian Martin).



as the placement of objects, is shuffled. While the details don't coalesce into one canonical story, they definitely concern a fatal car crash and a lost loved one. The game is a place of grief and of loss rather than concrete specifics.

The island you walk over is a deeply polluted space. Seaweed is draped over coke cans on the beach. Bottles mingle with the sand, their textures intertwining. A boat is wrecked upon the rocks, sharing their shapes and tones. Tyres, fishing gear, and flotsam have become the flora of this space, the tide carrying humanity's disregard for the planet and bringing it to rest here, looking out over the Atlantic. This is where society's debris washes up and is left behind. It's a confrontation, a challenge of our lifestyles, that we usually try to avoid. How do you treat people and how do you treat the places you live? The answers to these questions will come to define you, and us as a people. The Anthropocene is, in essence, the new geological era

we have crafted, characterized by the impact our societies will have on the Earth's climate and environment on a geological scale. It is in the durability of our creations in which our legacy lies, in the anthropocenic crust we shall shed like a filthy skin upon the earth: the anonymous trash, the plastics, the metal and concrete. The residuum of global capitalism washes up on *Dear Esther's* island to linger; to gently, fragment by fragment, disintegrate over millennia. We set out to trace these marks, follow the veins of pollution and grief, and chart their meander across this amorphous isle to see what can be learned.

This impact we have upon landscapes shapes *Dear Esther*. The island has been emptied of fish and animals and we're left with ghosts at the edge of our vision and a solitary, swirling bird. This is our own peculiarly English form of ecological degradation, not some showy collapse but what Robert Macfarlane calls "a slow grinding away of species and of



subtlety,” a brand of apocalypse which is gentler than flooding and tornadoes but just as toxic. When we talk of extinction, the imagination goes to exotic animals pushed to the brink by our actions, but the number of common animals is plummeting as well—as J.B. Mackinon outlines for *Pacific Standard Magazine* in an article titled “Tragedy of the Common”, a 2014 study discovered that a fifth of Europe’s nesting bird population has been lost since 1980, largely due to the spread of industrial agriculture. We are draining the world, emptying it of its fecund variety. We must remember this is not something new but rather an escalation, a cumulation, of the violence Western societies have been enacting on populations and environments around the world. As Kathryn Yusoff writes in her vital 2018 book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*—“The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending

worlds for as long as they have been in existence.” The island is sculpted by this idea of a world on the way to its end, a fragmentary experience of a polluted, shaped landscape, stripped of its natural life.

But the island doesn’t feel empty. The team at *The Chinese Room* has patterned and textured traces of people over and under it, natural species replaced with our products and our debris. The traditional ‘landscape’ feels like the wrong term for the spaces we live and move in now. There is a harmony within the word, a sense of all the minutiae of a scene coalescing to create one coherent whole. It is static, a noun articulating a set place. What is traditionally seen as the landscape, settled and steadfast, is now flexible and mutable in our hands as forests are felled, rivers dammed, oceans heated and acidified. *Dear Esther* is this kind of space, an unsettled landscape—fluid rather than static, discordant rather than harmonious.

This whole island is a profoundly human space and not only as a product of hardware and code. White wounds have been gouged into the chalk to warn sailors of illness. Fences encircle the cliffs. Bright luminescent designs are scrawled in the rock’s winding underbelly. People are, as the narrator puts it, “painted, carved, hewn, scarred” into this space, a fusion of pained personal expression and systematic function changing the face of the island. Look at something in front of you now and think about what it implicates, what systems have brought it before you, what people have seen it on its way to laying there. This is a practice that *Dear Esther*’s narrator encourages in us as we follow the fragments of their narration, the drawings and debris— “Can I identify the scratches his nails ruined into the rocks? Am I following him cell for cell, inch for inch?”

It is vital to recognise that this is not some pristine island, some wilderness you can retreat to.

We are told that Donnelly, a syphilitic writer whose path we follow, arrived on the island three hundred years ago and discovered that there were already miserable shepherds and sickly herds living here. This is not, and has not been for a long time, a wild space. In the game’s second chapter, of four total, you walk for a brief time along a path bordered by steep rock walls before the space opens out in front of you. A tanker is wrecked in a boulder-clad bay, its shipping containers cast over the beach, organs torn out by the impact. It is the largest piece of debris on the island, its cans immovable like fallen standing stones, monuments of global commerce. Salt air, sea spit, and wind have left it rusting, decaying like everything else here. A series of other smaller vessels are wrecked around the shores of this rock, mostly fishing boats, along with the remains of something resembling a Viking longboat, evidence of earlier pillaging and extraction that marks the arrival of globalised trade on these

“Can I identify the scratches his nails ruined into the rocks? Am I following him cell for cell, inch for inch?”

Hebridean shores. All that remains of it now is one central beam with curved offshoots, ribs rising into the air with nothing left to protect. How long have people been coming to this island? How long have the lost found themselves wrecked here? There is a lighthouse to ward off these kinds of wreckages, we hear of trawlers ploughing through the seabed, and walk by shepherd-constructed fences as we follow foot-forged paths. It is a worked space. We cross the island, gaze upturned to a radio tower. These are managed waters encircling managed land. These different structures and debris are earth-writing, articulations of the politics and the economics we live in through the shaping of the land, the interpretable inscription of system upon matter. Everything here has a rough, basic utility, a barbed connection to profit. This is a place where people have been before, have chiselled and hewn and moved matter, orchestrated it. This is part of the magnetism of the island, how it is at once empty of people and yet eloquent

with their many histories, these twisting, fragmentary pasts we search it for.

I'm wary of making this sound more morbid than it is. The island is not all shoreline and wind-beaten hillsides. Below the surface is a tunnelled maze of phosphorescence; warm candles guiding you through a tangle of blue light refracting off and shining through stalactites and stalagmites. Blue lichen dots the cave walls. Mineral crystals form dense seams of sea-blue stars in the rockface. The music distorts slightly as you're entering the caves, re-tuning as you dive down, away from the surface, "even deeper into veins of the island, where the signals are blocked altogether." Everything works on a different frequency here. Where flowers and sky are muted above ground, here, colour is supercharged. Huge spaces open up, cavities in the island's heart where water cascades around you, all the island's run-off congregating here in secret. Rather than



coastline panoramas your vision is hemmed in. Caves are spaces of contact, of water-carving and time-hollowing. It is where our vision is at its most constricted and the delirium of the game escalates, the painted symbols seen above ground multiplied. Away from the eyes of passing trawlers, these chemical articulations have flourished, the dark privacy fecund with expression. One of the final tunnels is wallpapered with fluorescent chemical compounds, Bible references, and mechanical diagrams, a cacophony of influences wrapped around the walls in glowing blue. There is a mania to it, ancient seeming, hieroglyphic. It is a space that presses and impresses upon you. Caves can be their own self-contained worlds away from the confusion of the surface, containing their own weather systems or subterranean exhibits of lost cultures, such as the prehistoric art of the Lascaux complex in France. Here, beneath the island, away from the lattice work of pollution and

constructions, a different form of expression has taken root. Rather than the earth-writing of capital and governance, these marks are personal, human offshoots of the car crash that haunts the narrator, and all its trauma and grief. These expressions form the luminescent heart of *Dear Esther*. The game's explicit focus is on the personal rather than the structural. It does not give all its emphasis to the political and systemic causes of environmental collapse but uses the symptoms of this damage as its visual and conceptual framework. Personal grief finds expression through global pollution, individual suffering mapped onto the debris and the material decay. The damage we wreak and what we leave behind is foundational, shaping how loss, pain, and hope find expression.

We emerge from the caves and trace our way around one final beach before our ascent. It is night now, and the bay is washed by moonlight and sea. The phosphorescence found below



*Personal
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through
global
pollution.*

has been replaced by candles and moonlight, amber glow and pure white. There is a church-like feel to the beach: the candles devotional, the moonlight clean and the music so full as it grows and swells. This is a cathedral in full flower, our inched movement cumulative.

Objects associated with the fatal accident in the past are arranged around the beach in cave-alcoves; candles and luminescence as our guides. This depiction is how the island will always be, moving from evening to night, evening to night, until people finally stop returning to it. It can seem like a museum exhibit of a landscape, our pollution digitally fossilized. This is not some static archive, a fixed catalogue of interpretable objects, but a shifting constellation, each object its own vocal articulation of the suffering and grief that color the island. The narration tells this as a deliberate process—“I have spent days cataloguing the garbage that washes ashore here and I have begun to assemble a collection in the deepest recess I could find. What a strange

museum it would make.” Think about museums, of the act of cataloguing and organising the “garbage,” the detritus of our lives. What it would mean to see your pain and your sins arranged on a beach.

Our pasts and the stories we tell ourselves about where we come from shape and distort how we see and understand. These stories are woven through the structures which are left behind—a distorting system of wires hidden in the eroding walls of a bothy, the half-seen writing in a circle of lichen-growing standing stones. *Dear Esther* can be described as a ghost story as actual ghostly figures can be seen at times throughout the island, but these fading figures are not the most eerie presence. Instead it is through this latticed network of previous inhabitants and previous visitors that the landscape is made ghostly. The past must always have been a disturbance in the landscape. How would the shepherds of this island have read the circle of

standing stones? How would these monuments have distorted their relationship with the island when revealing that someone else had been here before, had believed, and faded away?

Mark-making is not just a matter of that drink you bought ending up on a remote beach. It can be about giving yourself permanence, anchoring yourself, belonging. Matter is malleable, yet stubborn. We need its stubbornness, its durability. We need its materiality to latch onto, to wrap our thoughts around for ballast, as the narrator says—“Why cling so hard to the rock? Because it is the only thing that stops us from sliding into the ocean. Into oblivion.” This is part of why we have gravestones and monuments. There is a comfort in physicality, in the solidity of objects, when faced with the flickering impermanence of your thoughts. In their density, their tactility, physical objects that can outlast us offer a sense of immortality. The narration and our search for human traces is driven by the hope that they can

“serve as some evidence” of life—the hope that in the solidity of a mark there is something legible, something interpretable which you can hold onto in the face of the harrowing grief tearing into the soft ground of your stomach. Marks are all we have left in *Dear Esther*. They are what we trace and follow, what we cling onto and weave our stories around.



“I wonder, did they assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses, marking the geography with a superimposed significance; that they could actually walk the bible and inhabit its contradictions?”

- *Dear Esther, Chapter 1: The Lighthouse*

Nature has a silent expressiveness, unwittingly drawing a reaction from us, leaving us always engaged in a dialogue with what is around us. The colours of a place, the

way space opens up or constricts around you, the sights you see and hear; these and a myriad other effects substantiate what you experience in those spaces, give weight to it. The island's rugged topography provides the base for these cumulative experiences as music and language wrap around it with the wind. We listen to the narrator's secrets and plant some of our own in this thin, fertile soil. And this process of engagement, of confession on both sides, creates a space which is fundamentally internal. Several narration passages contain gentle glances towards the player, both how they are freshly interpreting this space and how we are so able to come back: "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." We don't mine the island for our own insights, but let it grow, blossom, follow its own shape, sending out tendrils of growth around this fertile rock.

Dear Esther was pioneering in its lack of traditional modes of interactivity, and there is a nakedness to your first playthrough. You come to on a stretch of concrete with dilapidated buildings and stretching seas, without controls or understanding, only able to move at the same steady pace and zoom your vision slightly. This can be seen as a rejection of the player, taking away their agency and ability to fully be part of this world. But this removal of power actually allows you to sink into the game further. You have to give it attention, make yourself porous, present your mind as if chalk for the game to sculpt and shape spaces within you.

The pacing makes it difficult not to focus on the landscape too. It forces you to refocus on what is important and what is worth your time. A huge, open world such as the one explored in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is beautiful but is so often galloped through, seen as a blur on the way to a destination.

It's only in specific places, like your camp, that you are forced to slow down, to give your time and attention to the environment. There is no ticking clock here; everyone is past the point of rescuing. You have the freedom to look, to digest, to dwell. This form of attention suits the island. Land flows slowly. Islands are erosion and growth; wind, water and rock over and around each other forever. How we move through the game is a more meditative way of engaging with information, one that gives weight and time to your thoughts rather than forcing ideas onto you. This is what you should do in the world, hold your eyes open to it. This kind of walking offers a non-extractive, non-capitalist mode of experience and has a long cultural and political history. We do not extract but rather spectate and experience. You cannot change anything; you just try to understand it and situate yourself within it. You can't move objects, pick flowers, hoard half a world in a satchel. *Dear Esther* removes the human

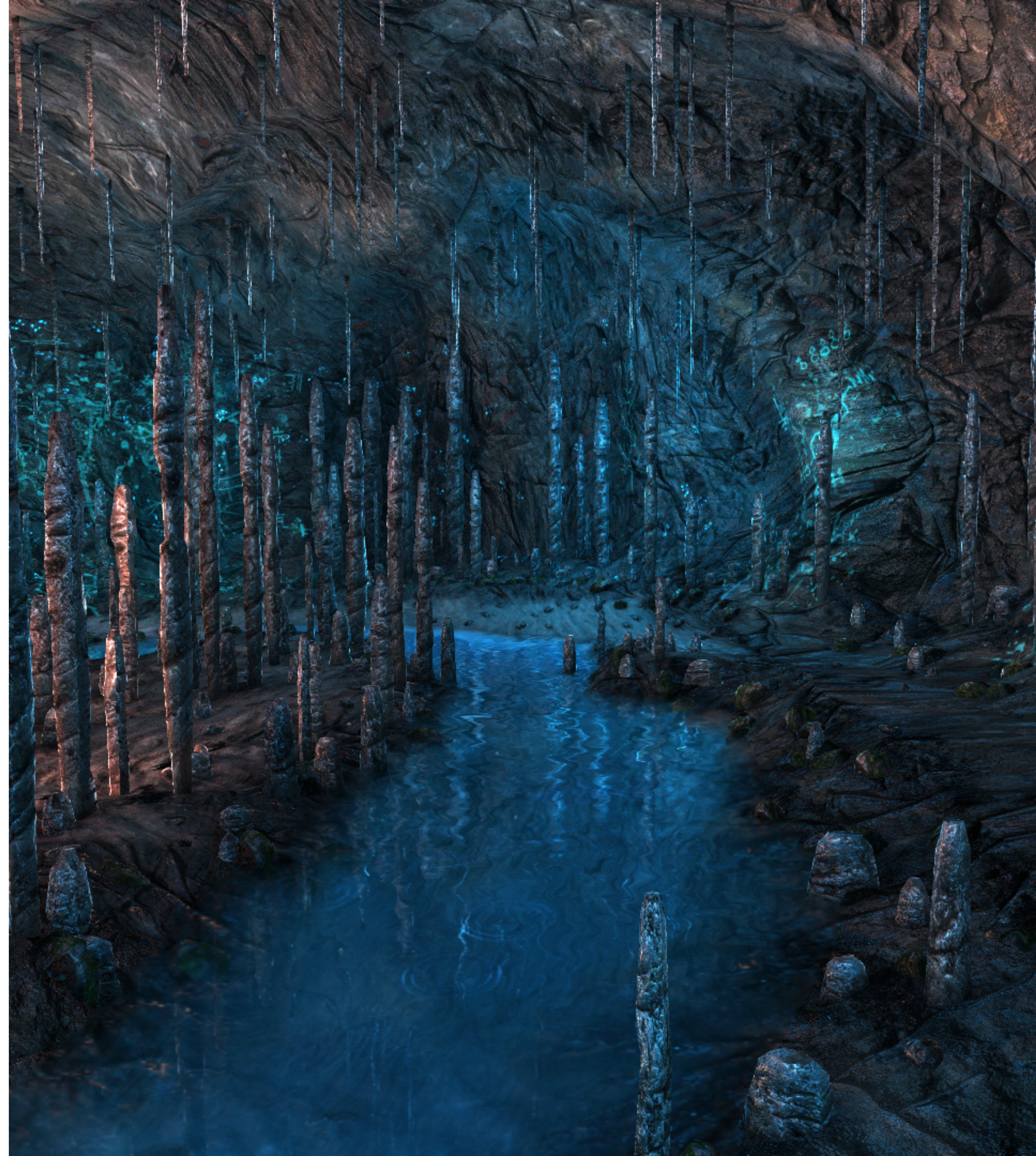
capacity to sculpt and to control. This is perhaps part of why some people don't like it—it involves an acceptance of powerlessness. And it's understandable that some people might find the game boring with it being stripped of a first-person shooter's usual sensory overload. The challenge is to embrace this initial aimlessness. A desire for stimuli drives us to pore over the landscape, trace the luminescence of the diagrams, watch the red-purple hues wax and wane through the evening sky, to notice how the lilac and yellow of the flowers are muted in the air. Sink yourself into how richly textured the sound of the wind is, feel how the wind is not digitally sterile but twisting and hurtling, whistling-pure performance. This kind of attention is humbly radical and is fundamental here. Paying attention is key to how we now have to live—aware of what our choices implicate, how we structure our understanding of the world, what we pick up and what we hold on to.

This kind of walking offers a non-extractive, non-capitalist mode of experience.

There are some woods near the house I grew up in. They follow the nearby river's slate-cliff carving meander and offer a sheltered island of true green space among the checkerboard of fields and the negative-space of the moors. Years of my memories are embedded within them, rustling dormant beneath the canopy. When I think back to these woods, years of exploration and minute attention to silver birch and stream, to bluebell and salmon leap, swirl and dance around me. Each memory is rooted to a place, and I feel it anchor me with it. We often say we are *attached* to places. To belong you have to hold and be held. Memory is an act of holding and there is something tactile in how we store it away and how it hits us when we remember. Each interpretive association you make in *Dear Esther*, and each moment of wide-eyed attention, anchors you to the game space, embeds you within it. From that initial state of disorientation on the pier, the virtual landscape reaches out to you and offers you its hand.

The narration is a mingling of voices and registers; scientific and religious, deeply floral, starkly mundane. There is an intentional element of disorientation woven into this but also an opening up. The variety is dense from line to line, but each reference and throw-out is an offer of understanding. This variety is part of this small world's richness. It allows us to repeatedly return, the game's narration and debris re-orientating themselves with each fresh visit in the hope that "There must be something new to find here—some nook or some cranny that offers a perspective worth clinging to." What we connect to, collect, hold onto, is what substantiates us. The narrator's grief drives them for some solidity, something worth holding, clinging to. Grief implies love, it craves hope.

This form of deep attention is key to orienting yourself in the world, orchestrating your place through an attention to the fragments and pieces which surround you. Beyond being the product of



technological constraints, the game's island isolation is key to this, both the characters and the player coming here on a solitary search for understanding. Away from society, the wild can be a space which allows a purity of focus and relationship between the individual and Everything.

This vein of thought draws on a long Christian tradition of reckoning with God and your place within the universe through an isolation in nature. In his book *The Wild Places* Robert Macfarlane tells how, in Britain between 500 and 1000 AD, “an extraordinary migration occurred [...] Monks, anchorites, solitaries and other devout itinerants began to travel in their thousands to the bays, forests, promontories, mountain-tops and islands of the Atlantic littoral.” They became known as the *Peregrini* as they left behind the restrictions of society and in their nakedness sought to immerse themselves in Creation. The figure of the hermit in *Dear Esther*, “a holy

man who sought solitude in its most pure form,” follows their course, removing himself to this windswept rock and seeking to absolve himself in its rocks and streams. “They say he threw his arms wide in a valley on the south side and the cliff opened up to provide him shelter”—arms and cliffs mirror one another, body melding into rock face, consciousness melting away into the island to seep through the rock fissures and melt among the sea-spray. The hermit is just one part of the spiritual structure of the island. Bible references are littered throughout the narration and the cliff faces. Ideas of pilgrimage, of journeying somewhere to resolve and align yourself along a storied route are both passingly mentioned and foundational, the controller our bottomless boat. The hermit and the shepherd are ghostly characters who used to inhabit the island and must be deliberately archetypal. As we move around the island, this sense of pilgrimage grows. We



gather understanding as we walk, weaving ourselves into this new world through interpretation and attention.

Today, people are increasingly separated from nature, increasingly exploring digitally rather than physically. The act of playing *Dear Esther* is a digital imitation of the journey of the Peregrini once removed; we are following other people's stories and this is a polluted land, filled with our debris and our marks. We do not come here to reflect on our space within some pure Creation, but to witness, to give our attention to how we impact upon our environment, the debris and damage inherent to our creations. The dream of joining, of some green dissolution, seems an increasing unreality. In the stripping away of society's structures we may not be smooth jigsaw puzzle pieces that fit and melt into everything. We are unwieldy creatures, our societies and habits jagged. I'm not sure we can truly join in, becoming like one of the chemical compounds

painted over the walls of the island—fused as one coherent whole. Part of the strength of *Dear Esther* is that you have to recognise this complexity, embrace how everything does not just assimilate and run smooth. The more you look, the more you return, the more this becomes clear as its stories shift and refuse to fall into shape.



“I'm traversing my own death throes. The infection in my leg is an oilrig that dredges black muck up from deep inside my bones. I swallow fistfuls of diazepam and paracetamol to stay conscious. The pain flows through me like an underground sea.”

- *Dear Esther*, Chapter 3: *The Caves*

At *Dear Esther*'s beginning the island feels tangible, fence-clad hill-faces and wrecked tankers anchoring us in a rugged reality. But as we traverse and freely

associate, the island slips further from reality, increasingly colored by the imagination and the narrator's escalating delirium. This liting instability and unreality increases step by step along with the narrator's pain. One of the few spoken passages heard on every playthrough tells of a fall and a femur break, the pain dampened by painkillers found among the island's wreckage. It allows the coherence of the language and our understanding to fragment even further. It is part of an growing distortion of interpretation, systems going haywire. From the outset, usual systems of clue-finding and theorizing have not been enough for this polluted space. With the pain and its delirium, further systems of thought start to fail. Sentences increasingly don't feed into one another at this later stage of the game, the narrations a chaotic rush of images cascading under the moon. Language becomes a beautiful pollution of the mind, distorting, waxing, and waning.

The storytelling is intentionally constructed so as never to fully resolve. Words and ideas are there to primarily make an impression upon you, to have an impact, but trying to make cohesive sense of it all is difficult. There is a joy in the tension between images which do not snugly fit together, in bottomless boats and islands made of kidney stones. Prize and cherish the strange interpretive shapes the game makes. Give them attention, let them crash around and over you. The island and the music are coherent and beautiful enough that they act as a binding agent for these fragmentary, collapsing images. Everything is shaped by an instability, a porousness, the narration full of cracks and fissures to lose yourself in. Our understanding of the island, down to such basic elements as whether it's real or not, can change from moment to moment. The game's landscape hinges upon your interpretation, it is a space which is both external, built out of code and console, and fundamentally

internal, shaped through metaphor and association.

Feeling and thought are wrapped around one another here, the narration anchored in the body and its pain, mapped out and melted into the island. In everyday life the body is not the same as the world, but we do feel the world still. “The infection is not simply of the flesh”—how we think is how we act, how we shape the world. I think a part of why people do not seem to truly feel the urgency of our current ecological situation is how difficult it is to look at the Anthropocene, how difficult it is to adjust your eyes to its scale. The effects of our society’s actions are so present and yet so dispersed that it is easy to drown under their variety. But these impacts are a product of systems of thought, modes of consumption, patterns of behaviour. A way of thinking which accepts and embraces the pollution of a landscape entails a pollution of the body and mind.

We can feel the impact we wreak upon the world. Ecological grief seems unavoidable and natural.

You can feel the fires burning, the droughts biting, the trees falling. Our souls are part-topographical, built of the places we have known and hold onto. Now, with the deep awareness of our interrelation, we know that how we live leaves marks all over the world, how deep these marks will turn out to be. We are not only attached to the places we have been but our actions tie us to places all over the world in a million disorientating, heart-wrenching ways. David Wallace-Wells’s soberingly terrifying article for *New York Magazine* in 2017 told us, “In the sugarcane region of El Salvador, as much as one-fifth of the population has chronic kidney disease, including over a quarter of the men, the presumed result of dehydration from working the fields they were able to comfortably harvest as recently as two decades ago. With dialysis, which is expensive, those with kidney failure can expect

to live five years; without it, life expectancy is in the weeks.” We are part of the world. A collapsing environment is not just suffering polar bears and plastic. It is a grieving mind and a broken body. *Dear Esther* lives through this interrelation—body, mind, and place all growing and corroding together.



“When we become waterlogged, and the cage disintegrates, we will intermingle. When this paper aeroplane leaves the cliff edge, and carves parallel vapour trails in the dark, we will come together.”

- *Dear Esther, Chapter 4: The Beacon*

Dear Esther’s end is deeply ambiguous, both morbid and hopeful, hinting at the dream that we could seize and become this moment where:

“One unembodied thought /
Thinks the heart into stillness as
the world / Was left behind for
something green & new”

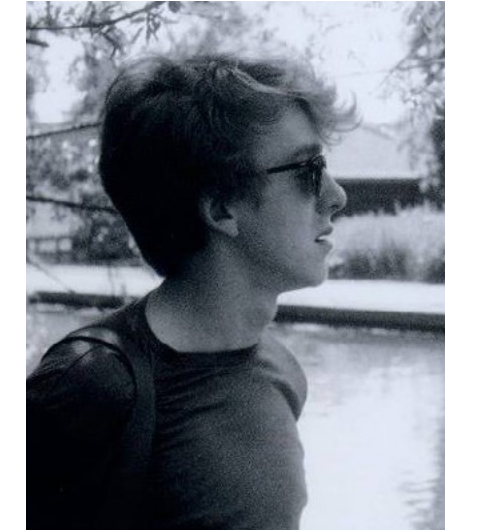
We fall off a cliff and, rather than hitting the ground, rise into the air and fly like a bird. There is an undeniable temptation in that final gliding away, in following the dream of the Peregrini and leaving to find somewhere wild and unpolluted. But this dream was cooked up in an era when nature and society were more separate. If *Dear Esther* shows us anything it is the impossibility of this idea. Everything leaves a trace and we are built out of the marks we make. We are already present in the environment, manifest through our societal actions. We cannot melt away into the landscape like the hermit but we will stick and remain there; radioactive isotopes in the rock record, plastic lodged in the seabed. We have joined with the landscape, have dissolved how we think and how we act into it through our tapestry of contamination. This is central



to the game and to our current predicament.

This is not all as morbid and painful as it sounds. The island is not all trash and debris. It is beautiful in its starkness, in the submerged luminescence, in the music and the language which flows over it, in its sheer created existence. To grieve, you first have to love. The game lives through your interpretation, your willingness to give your attention to it. More than anything it relies on empathy; on listening, looking, and building connections. The world out there is still redeemable. There are things worth working through the grief for.

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Cameron Hill recently finished a research Masters on woodland poetry by working-class writers and currently spends his time pint-pulling, writing and occasionally pickling.

