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"The Dream of an Island": *Dear Esther* and the Digital Sublime

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1. Introduction

There is little wonder in beauty. For the individual, beauty is easy to identify, for it "demands no assistance from our reasoning" (Furniss 170). It is discerned through those "sensible qualities" that "cause love, or some passion similar to it" (Burke 91). The sublime experience is less apparent, lying beyond our perception, emerging from qualities too great to undergo the same affective calculations or measurements as beauty. In short, "the sublime, Burke's objective or Kant's subjective, exceeded beauty in that it was not readily subject to such measure" (Reiss 75). Kant remarks that beauty "is what pleases in the mere judgment (and there not by the medium of sensation in accordance with a concept of understanding)," and the sublime "pleases immediately through its opposition to the interest of sense" (80). Lyotard's position is such that the sublime, as construed by Burke and Kant, "outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their paths" (101). It is within this framework—the established connection between the sublime and the avant-garde—that I will situate my argument that electronic literature and literary games avail of an aesthetic of the sublime.

2. The Sublime

Kant proposes a distinction between the "mathematically" sublime and the "dynamically" sublime, though he does not refrain from offering a more universal definition: "The *sublime* consists merely in the *relation* by which the sensible in the representation of nature is judged available for a possible supersensible use" (Kant 79). Pleasure is derived from the mathematically sublime as a result of the tension between rationale and imagination; reason tells us that all objects are finite, while imagination can perceive such as infinite. Our sensibilities are overwhelmed, yet our reason insists upon the finitude of the object that, through its magnitude, is beyond our perception. Kant is careful in his associations,

as is Burke, and while there is much talk of size and empiricism across both discourses, the sublime is, predominantly, painted as an aesthetic experience: "it must be the aesthetical estimation," says Kant of the mathematically sublime (Kant 70). Where the aesthetic judgment of the mathematically sublime relies on an estimation of magnitude, the dynamically sublime is experienced when we are presented with a natural object of such immense power that it grips us with fear, but, "we can regard an object as *fearful*, without being afraid *of* it" (Kant 74). The "might" of such objects can indeed be frightening, but their attraction emerges from this fear, "provided only that we are in security; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height" (75).

Reason provides the security required to transform fear into pleasure; our capacity to know that that which we perceive as infinite is indeed finite—our reason is challenged, but even though the sublime object may seem beyond the power of human reason, that reason reasserts itself. The sublime is the experiential manifestation of this reassertion, it occurs when the mind is conceptually strained, resolving its reason and imagination in an effort to successfully process the perceived object. It is perhaps anxiety that is at the root of that which makes the sublime pleasurable. This is reflected in Burke's treatise, where he focuses on the terror instilled by that which is dark and obscure; our perception is overwhelmed with uncertainty and terror, but pleasure is derived from the faculties of the mind that remain convinced of the fiction of such a perception: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (Burke 40). Anxiety and delight form something of a symbiosis for Burke, offering mutual regulation so that this most powerful of experiences might emerge.

This, as Lyotard recapitulates, is what gives the sublime its indeterminacy: "reason, the faculty of presentation, the imagination" all fail to "provide a representation," and this "failure of expression gives rise to pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented" (98). From this indeterminacy emerges the pleasure of the sublime, "attesting *a contrario* to an imagination striving to figure even that which cannot be figured" (98). This terror is heightened, Lyotard argues, by the sense of privation that we may feel when we are unable to comprehend the sublime object: "What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening" (99). Lyotard's interpretation of Burke's sublime links terror to privation: "privation of light, terror of

darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death" (99), defining the sublime feeling as "a very big, very powerful object" which "threatens to deprive the soul of any 'it happens'," immobilising it, making it "as good as dead" (99–100). To be an aesthetic experience, of course, it has already been noted that this emotional intensity must be modified, and herein lies the purpose of art, which "[distances] this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight" (100).

We have seen this purpose borne across print fiction, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century origins of the philosophical debate (see Fredricks), and later, in modern and postmodern aesthetics, perhaps most notably beyond the page, in the noir and neo-noir (see Shaw; Tabbi). The contemporary sublime is less metaphysical than its predecessors—the darkness of the soul has been subverted by the potential for immensity. The digital expanse *might* be vast, the narrative worlds of screen fictions constructed of unknown and alluring—but rigidly constrained—possibility. And it is in such a context that this newest of modes has returned to aesthetic principles once privileged by the Romantics.

3. The Digital Sublime

If the sublime emerges from the tension between our faculties and that which we are perceiving, then the digital is the zenith of that experience. The very nature of graphics, the awe that can be inspired by the seemingly endless depths of screen, is such that readers can be overawed by the magnitude of what is presented for their traversal. A large-scale work of digital art may seem without limits, but its boundaries are mathematically defined and structured with absolute precision—the limitations and constraints of such spaces are logically defined in a way that, unlike nature, can be reasonably traced. A game may seem infinite, but by the very nature of it being a game, we know that it is not, that we are in fact operating within a severely confined story space. Readers and players know this, and yet, are nonetheless attracted by the promise of exploration, the allure of freedom and liberation. By presenting as infinite the inherently finite, electronic literature and literary games demonstrate precisely how it is that the aesthetic of the digital is sublime. There are works which present the finite as such, but there is always some suggestion of expansion, if even slight. In Graham Allen's one-line-a-day life-writing piece, *Holes* (Allen and O'Sullivan), readers are greeted with

a set number of lines, corresponding to the number of days that have passed since the poem began. While this volume of content is finite, readers are conscious of the fact that tomorrow there will be more, that potentially, for years to come, there will be more, until reason takes over and they realise that, indeed, someday, this poem will reach its inevitable conclusion—it cannot outlast a lifetime. If the sublime does not exist on the surface level, then it emanates from beneath, from the technical surfaces which the user cannot always penetrate, an essential part of the aesthetic that produces the interactivity, but is hidden from the reader.

In electronic literature and literary games, the sublime is intrinsically subsumed, the nuances of which can be central to a user's experience. This is particularly so in narratives set within "open worlds," expansive virtual spaces designed to intrigue users through the illusion of choice and the allure of exploration. Developers actively try to leave users in awe, presenting space which seems boundless. As expansive as a game world might appear, the liberty of digital environments is a mathematical illusion, and indeed, readers traverse these spaces on very narrow, predetermined paths. Traversal of these spaces produces a form of digital storytelling that is fragmented, with pacing dictated by the user. By giving control of the narrative progression to the reader through vast spatial encapsulation of these narratives, the author is reinforcing the illusion of choice. The belief that the traversal is non-linear is reinforced by the exploratory element, further reducing the visibility of what is essentially a multiplicity of linearities. The lexia are shrouded in exploration, heightening the sense of agency for the reader. The illusion is evident in the fact that playable space is often separate from narrative space, in that there are many secondary objectives and discoveries to distract the player, but the narrative progression remains static, hidden in this false complexity. The side tasks are often inconsequential to the main plot, yet they serve the purpose of reinforcing the sublime by adding layers to the core narrative arc, augmenting its awe.

Infinitude and choice are illusions offered to digital artists through the media with which they work. Electronic literature, particularly those works which strive for a substantial sensory experience, such as augmented reality, can challenge our faculties through what might be perceived as a lack of restraint. The illusion of choice offered by hypertextuality, the seemingly multifaceted layers of interpretation that arises from digitally complex works—these all serve the digital sublime. While Kant maintains that reason always reasserts itself, the rate of affirmation is variable. The illusion of choice is such that, oftentimes, the player's faculties are so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the digital artefact that they do not immediately think of the spatial constraints,

but rather, revel in the potential—they see the "very big, very powerful [digital] object," and it both threatens and delights. This is the power of the illusion of interactivity—readers and players find themselves in a vast environment, its discovery, the means by which the story will present itself, seemingly under their influence alone. This aesthetic has been central to the form right from its beginnings, when hypertextual fiction, despite the pretentions of freedom, were as finite as any text. In this particular regard, the difference between a first-generation hypertextual work like Joyce's *afternoon: a story*, and a technically sophisticated Unity-based piece like *All the Delicate Duplicates*, by Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell, is minimal—regardless of how vast the space might seem, the narrative space, and the paths open to the reader, are finite. The power of contemporary screen fictions such as the latter is that they increasingly efface these limits to the point where reason, while perhaps not suspended, is certainly belied. They reinforce the illusion of choice which, while quantifiable, gives the reader a sense of freedom which, although certainly an illusion, remains liberating and awe-inspiring.

4. The Sublime in Dear Esther

Originally a *Half Life 2* mod circulated on *ModDB*, *Dear Esther* was re-skinned and re-released as a commercial title for Windows in February 2012. It was written and directed by Dan Pinchbeck, with artistry by Robert Briscoe, and an original score by Jessica Curry. As a consequence of considerable critical acclaim and commercial success, the game is now available for OS X (2012), Linux (2013), and PlayStation 4 (2016), produced by Pinchbeck's and Curry's development studio, The Chinese Room. *Dear Esther* is a "walking simulator," wherein the user traverses Briscoe's impression of a Hebridean island from a first-person perspective, revealing text-based lexia at different points on their journey.



Fig 1. A scene from *Dear Esther*, demonstrating the wide expanses of the island that players can seemingly explore.

The space inhabited by readers of *Dear Esther* is visually stunning, evidenced by the title's receipt of the prize for Excellence in Visual Arts at the 2012 Independent Games Festival. The story begins as the player sets foot on a landing slip on the outskirts of the island, and immediately, there is absence of much of what one would expect from a game—there are no instructions, no clearly defined objectives, only space. It soon becomes clear that interaction with this narrative involves only two actions: walking and looking. As you look, an objective finally reveals itself in the shape of a distant red beacon, flashing in the mist. Players have a destination, and it is clear that they have an island to explore as they venture toward that destination and whatever reward it might hold.

The realist backdrop of the story—an isolated landscape fabled for bleak topography—is an idyllic setting for the lamentations of a lonely wanderer; this is a place where even "gulls do not land" (Pinchbeck). The procedural rhetoric of *Dear Esther* is reflected in the game's literary style, influenced by Burroughs: "the way William Burroughs worked structurally was a big influence, but also I was really interested in moving towards a quite image-heavy, symbolic, poetic use of language rather than the normal descriptive tone we find in games" (Pinchbeck, in McMullan). The delivery of the textual content, spoken by the protagonist in a performative-like manner is reminiscent of Burroughs, while we are frequently treated to loose, audacious metaphors, typical of the 1960s American countercultural Beat Generation to which he belonged. The path that one traverses in *Dear Esther* is, by the standards of other ludic titles, quite linear, but the content compensates for the form, and instead of a mire of procedural selections, we encounter a shattered lexical assemblage. The fragmentation that one expects through a form that tends to present choice is substituted for fragmentation in the narrative's delivery, the cause and effect of each lexical revelation remaining unclear for much of the traversal.

But the delivery of the lexia can also form part of the procedural rhetoric, as a type of formulaic meta-content, with the symbolism that emerges from the words themselves assuming the role of content. The fragmented manner by which we traverse the texts is represented in the symbolism which they reveal: the lack of clarity in the narrative order is mirrored by the speaker's melancholic uncertainty:

> At night you can see the lights sometimes from a passing tanker or trawler. From up on the cliffs they are mundane, but down here they fugue into ambiguity. For instance, I cannot readily tell if they belong above or below the waves. The distinction now seems mundane; why not everything and all at once! There's

> nothing better to do here than indulge in contradictions, whilst waiting for the fabric of life to unravel. (Pinchbeck)

The speaker cannot make out whether the vessels belong below or above the waves, coming to the realisation that it does not entirely matter: "everything and all at once," he states. Soon after this fragment we encounter a Fibonacci spiral, traced in the sand (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Players encounter a Fibonacci spiral, which approximates the golden ratio, on one of the island's beaches.

The spiral, as content, directly references the electronic, as form. This mathematical blueprint, through frequent occurrence in nature, is often posited as being evidence of intelligent design in nature. Here, we see a reference to the nature of literary games: these are creations which have, in the shape of their developers, artists, and writers, higher powers which dictate the shape of the entire—mathematically formed—universe.

The world which our protagonist inhabits is confused, and like any hypertextual or interactive story, this confusion is shared by the reader. But where this confusion is reflected in the content, and often, in the mode of traversal, the symbolism of confusion—the illusion of choice—is dismissed when considered within the context of the mathematical blueprint within which it is enclosed. For the speaker, it is unclear whether the ships "belong above or below the waves," but there are no ships, only a reference to ships, in a universe—a game space—that has been designed by a creator who did not write code for ships. And thus, the sublime emanates as we try to fathom these ships sinking below and rising above the waves, this thought-process is in contention with our acceptance that the form possesses no ships, but that the content nonetheless gives reference to their presence.

For Pinchbeck, *Dear Esther* "is a dream," the "landscape is not an island, it's the dream of an island" (Pinchbeck)—you can see how the digital enables the author's sublime intentions, allowing for the

construction of a space that hints at more than what is programmatically offered. This is the potential of all art, of all writing, but with digital fiction it is made more explicit. Pinchbeck further unifies the connection between form and content with his lexia, describing the language as equally deceptive: "It didn't matter the sense it made, it was more about the kind of shapes it created… listening to something underwater, it'd be this very dreamlike, symbolic, poetic thing. It always frustrated me in games with game writing, this has really changed quite a lot, there was never enough space for poetic languages; it was very 'exposition-y,' very descriptive, very direct." There is a tension between the mathematical foundation of Pinchbeck's writing and the ways in which he describes it using quasi organic terms. He almost exudes the sublime in his own thinking—his process is one of cycles, wherein the natural contends with the artificial in an interplay between the fixed and the colossal.

Natural cycles occur frequently in the symbolism that one encounters throughout *Dear Esther*: the broken eggs in the cave, Greek and biblical references to the afterlife, the suggestion that the gulls will return to nest in the bones of the protagonist. Life and science interact throughout on the walls of the cave, on the walls of houses, and on the sides of stones we see scientific equations, helixes, the formula for alcohol, shapes that resemble the female reproductive organs—all of these visual stimuli point towards the story's tragic heart, the loss of life that resulted from a car crash. Mathematical sequences permeate this symbolism, such as in the bonding points on one of the chemical diagrams where we find the Hebrew letters, Aleph and Kaf. The numerical value of these letters is twenty-one, which is, to name but a few occurrences, the number of different seagull species on the island, the number of paper boats floating in the sea come the final episode, the number of the Sandford junction on the M5—where the aforementioned accident occurs—and the number of connections in the circuit diagram of the brakes. Furthermore, American physician, Duncan MacDougall, infamously remarked that the soul weighs three-fourths of an ounce, which would convert into twenty-one grams. The very essence of electronic literature—the symbiosis between the surface-level story and the underlying logical structures—is encapsulated in this symbolism. Twenty-one has no significance to the narrative, to the literary content, it is merely present, like the numbers that make any electronic piece function: they are not necessarily essential to the *story*, but they most exist, for they are essential to the *work* if it is to operate.

The literary is privileged over the ludic throughout *Dear Esther*. The form of this story is suited to this specific media because of its reliance on the visual—there is as much revealed about the plot in the scattered

debris on the island as there is in the speaker's offerings. Encountering shipwrecks on the island, we read the words, "neither did he eat nor drink," painted on the wrecked hull. The soon-to-be-recurring Biblical allusion is evident here, in that it refers to Saul after he is struck blind on the road to Damascus. An earlier lexicon reveals how the speaker had gone to meet Paul, the journey to his house being a personal pilgrimage. As Saul travelled the road to persecution and conviction, perhaps our speaker went to see Paul, who may have had a hand in Esther's death, in search of reason or retribution. Climbing the slopes in the second episode, we find a house built by Jakobson, a shepherd who died on this rock having caught a disease from his goats. Outlined on the side of the house is the same uterine shape that was seen in the caves, while inside are a number photographs of what appear to be ultrasounds (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. What appears to be an ultrasound, discovered in one of the houses you encounter on the island.

Such moments of discovery draw the reader further into the world of the narrative—what else is there to be discovered? In real time, one can ingest the story of *Dear Esther*, and explore much of the traversable game space, in approximately one hour—this is not *World of Warcraft*, this is a small independent development that sets a story within a limited space. But from such minute visual trinkets comes infinite possibilities for its readers—the island may be computationally small, but for its inhabitants, its limits seem endless. The illusion and power of the digital sublime is that knowing the entire contents of such limited spaces seems as though it is a task that would take a lifetime to achieve.

As we descend into the caves for the third act, the speaker ponders the journey of Jakobson, which seems identical to his own. The speaker wonders why Jakobson did not complete the journey as he himself intends to do. In the midst of the caves we reach the height of the speaker's delirium, as he recounts how he has seen Jakobson in his

dreams and that they would share their scars. Shortly after, we encounter the proclamation, "Damascus has fallen," an etching which grows more frequent as the journey draws to its close. Emerging from the caves onto a beach we find lighted candles scattered in a manner that suggests we have approached our final vigil. The visual gains further dominance, while the text continues to reveal, but the vignettes are only glances into the narrative's missing details. It is the objects marked out by the candles—the wrecked car parts, the family photographs—these are the objects which confirm what the lexia have only suggested. While *Dear Esther* privileges the literary over the ludic, our pilgrimage is far from just textual. The speaker mentions that when he was with Paul, the coffee mug that he was given was adorned with chemical formulae, and that you could trace your finger about them and new compounds would be summoned. This is a useful analogy for the aesthetic of electronic literature: new formulations of the literary can emerge from technical compositions. Saul was presented with the risen Christ as he walked the road to Damascus; our speaker is perhaps seeking death as a passage to rebirth and transformation. The procedural rhetoric of *Dear Esther* is also about transformation, about the significance of the journey itself, or in this instance, the traversal. This is a linear story transformed by computational artistry; the lexia are transformed by the media specifics of the traversal method—both the form and the content are about rebirth.

In *Dear Esther*, the illusion of choice is readily apparent. The traversal is linear, in that there is one starting point and one destination, and regardless of your decisions, the outcome is the same, the narrative is essentially consistent, with the exception of a few experiences which may be missed if the player is not attentive. Yet, this linearity is hidden beneath the work's spectacular visuals and vast horizons. This path you walk is not without its freedoms, but these horizons, the roaming Hebredian hills, are an illusion, in that the ultimate outcome is unaffected—like all literature, the story is essentially pre-programmed. This is the technological sublime which one encounters in the digital, and it is part of the symbolism of *Dear Esther*. This sublime partly emerges through denial, in this instance, the denial of any instructions, and indeed, denial of a map of the game world. The reader is not told where his/her journey must end, but it is clear that the intention is that they are attracted to the red beacon piercing the fog in the distance. In contrast to this red beacon are a number of far less apparent white beacons set atop buoys which surround the island. While these white beacons far outnumber the sole red beacon, it is only the latter which you are able to reach. These additional beacons suggest space, but while there are many such points beckoning throughout the world, we can only navigate

to one of them. We cannot climb the roaming hills, we can step out into the waves, we cannot explore the island beyond the limited paths that have been pre-determined for us. *All roads lead to Damascus*.

The linearity of the narrative is symbolised by the caves, which are confined to the point that your journey descends into near-potholing. As you progress through the caves, the speaker references his organs, no doubt an allusion to the throat-like appearance of the current surroundings (see Fig. 4). Crawling through the caves, you feel as though you are in the throat of some beast, with its teeth-like stalagmites and stalactites.



Fig. 4. A cave in *Dear Esther*, from which you ascend into the final act.

The irony of the contrast between the caves and other environments is that, while the caves appear to be more confined, in terms of the reader's autonomy, they are just as restricted as the rest of the island. While there may be more space to traverse above ground, the vectors open to players remain consistent throughout in that you may walk, at a constant speed, either forwards or backwards along a pre-determined path with limited scope for deviation. The trickling stream you encounter in the cave contrasts with the wide open ocean you encounter above ground, and even the acoustics, the echoes and drops versus the howling wind, all establish a dichotomy between these dissonant settings. But the dissonance is purely visual, and while it has aesthetic value, this value is utterly illusionary—you are always confined, potholing or otherwise.

The reader can be an active participant in the digital reading experience, but the transaction is still dictated by the author. This authorial control is evident in *Dear Esther*, where the traversal is entirely measured: you must walk, you cannot die, you are immersed in a sublime experience where freedom is suggested through a vast, open space, but in reality, it is confined by its computational limits. Detailed objects like shipwrecks cannot be explored, they merely serve as signposts in the narrative.

In some instances, electronic literature can offer a micro-sublime, particularly through the minute details that one finds scattered about a world: leaves that blow in the wind, discarded items you encounter—these all suggest origin, that the leaves blew from the other side of a vast island, and should the player choose, they could find that origin. Everything is merely the product of a trigger, revelations which are controlled by the narrative progression of the author. This is symbolised in some of the blowholes you encounter while in the caves (see Fig. 5)—you look upwards towards the light, thinking that there must be a world above. No such world exists, this is shading, rendered by the creators in this fashion to suggest the awesome, but in truth, it is the constrained. You cannot go where the digital sublime suggests.



Fig. 5. A blowhole from *Dear Esther*.

The final moment, when the game fades to black and gets stuck in an intentional loop, is one final explicit rendering of the sublime. Coded to remain in this loop infinitely, we see the infinite—the recurring scene and its symbolism—made possible by the finite—the code that executes this sequence. To leave the game, you must quit yourself, one final act of control by the player as active participant, but one which is bequeathed by the author. This is not to say that the player is never without some element of choice—if you fail to look in a certain direction you may miss something of significance—but that choice is predetermined, or certainly, offered from a limited selection of choices.

In *Dear Esther*, the reader is both observer and participant, reading the textual revelations, absorbing the visual symbolism, gaining more or less narrative insight depending on the paths that you choose, the walls that you examine. This duality is shared by our walker and speaker—which character is our observer, the speaker, and who is our participant, the walker; is one of them Esther, or is she neither? While the content reaches beyond the confines of its digital constraints, interpretations of

the story open to limitless permeations, the form is absolute, the presence of the Fibonacci circle something of a tattoo on the surface of the game, informing us that the gods of this universe are conscious of their world's structural confines. Incidentally, Pinchbeck seems to downplay such confines: "One of the things I love about writing for games is that you hand over so much control to the player that it becomes their story and that's really, really important rather than trying to force them." This agency is a great contributor to the digital sublime—this world has been devised by Pinchbeck, Briscoe, and Curry, but it is their readers who inhabit it, and more importantly, it is their readers who *interpret* it. The sublime space is an interpretive space, and so the infinite does not just emanate from the graphical suggestions, it also emerges from the act of reading, and this truly can be infinite. In this sense, as already noted, the digital sublime is no different to its precursors, but in the spaces that readers and players of such titles inhabit, it is perhaps more explicit, or rather, ambiguous, operating as a seductive force of false liberation.

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