

## Critical Play: Dear Esther

Developed By: The Chinese Room & Robert Briscoe

Published By: Secret Mode

Platform: Steam, IOS, Android, Console

For the critical play this week, I played Dear Esther. Dear Esther is a walking simulation game that takes you through a pretty immersive world the more you explore. The game does have explicit audio that touches on some dark subjects so I would say the target audience for this game is 13 and up. I can even see older players enjoying this game since the mechanics are pretty straightforward and it doesn't take much effort to be immersed.

The important formal elements of this game are the objectives, boundaries and players. This game is about a single player who tries to explore and reveal the game's narrative. This objective of discovery drives the character to immerse themselves into the story. The boundaries of this game are also important because they limit how the player explores the scenes. Certain sections are sometimes cutoff by rocks or cliffs which prohibits the player from exploring those areas.



I played this game for about an hour and a half and got to the point shown below. My personal playing experience was mostly fun. The type of fun this game intended for is a combination of fantasy, narrative and discovery. When I played, I found that I was having the most fun through the discovery and fantasy portion of the game. It was really immersive to start at a lighthouse and slowly discover more of the fantasy in the setting. The initial cave I walked into was a glimpse of the fantasy aspect of the game. The

twenty minutes prior to that, I didn't understand much about the realistic setting. When I found the glowing blue lines and crystals in the first cave, I became more excited to explore.

The mechanics of Dear Esther were extremely basic. Players could only walk and look around. When the scene was dark a flashlight would give the player a smaller viewing lens to look through the scene. I had a love/hate relationship with the simplicity of these mechanics. In some cases it really annoyed me and almost made me stop playing. During the second scene, I could not find the path to continue exploring. It felt like I was traversing up and down the same hill looking for a way to get out. The slow walking mechanic made it even more aggravating when I realized I walked 2 minutes to a dead end I had been to 3 times already. Then I'd have to walk another 2 minutes to get back to where I was and try a different path. Eventually, after I was about to give up I found a new path which led me to exciting new scenes. Furthermore, at this moment I hadn't been introduced to the scope of this narrative's fantasy element. It felt like I was walking around a broken containship for an unreasonable amount of time. At that point I wished there was a running mechanic. In other scenarios, the slow walking mechanic was extremely immersive. Once I got into the main cave, the slow walking of my character forced me to look around and explore the scenery. I felt like this forced me to notice the details of the scene and how each part of the cave changed as I walked through.

I think this would be a perfect game for VR. Viewing the game from my IPAD screen was still immersive, but if I was completely surrounded by the beautiful scenery the game would make me feel like I was the character in a way more immersive way. If I wanted to look behind me I could physically turn my head in a VR headset. In the current version, my fingers rotate the perspective which takes a bit away from being completely immersed. Another change I would make would be to include an option to speed up walking. Specifically, if the player has explored a scene for quite a while it may mean that they are lost or unsure of where to head to next. An option to speed up gameplay in this scenario would help alleviate some of the annoyance I experienced.