

# LETTERS AND THE UNSEEN WOMAN: EPISTOLARY ARCHITECTURE IN THREE RECENT VIDEO GAMES

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Video games facilitate new ways of engaging with the world by offering an alternative in the form of their narrower worlds, the virtual spaces in which they are set and into which users venture, seeking understanding and effecting change. Henry Jenkins has suggested a category of game design called “narrative architecture,” which facilitates “environmental storytelling [that] creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience.”<sup>1</sup> Jenkins proposes narrative architecture as an alternative to theories of video games that place an emphasis on either interactivity or narrative, at the expense of understanding the dynamic between the two.

I propose an addition to his narrative architecture that I term “epistolary architecture,” that is, the distribution of messages around a game space.<sup>2</sup> Epistolary architecture fits into and expands the subcategory of environmental storytelling that Jenkins identifies as “embedded narratives.” Such narratives, usually set in the past, are “embedded within the mise-en-scène awaiting discovery.”<sup>3</sup> Jenkins suggests *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), in which the player explores mysterious structures on a deserted island, as an exemplar of such a game. These games are often based on a positivistic detective model: a player assesses physical evidence and draws conclusions about past events, thereby reconstructing a secondary historical narrative contained within the game’s primary narrative of exploration.

To characterize “epistolary architecture,” I turn instead to three recent games—*Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), and *Bientôt L’été* [It’s Nearly Summer] (Tale of Tales, 2012)—in which a player must access particular locations in the virtual world of the game to encounter the hidden messages. Each game thus interrogates the connections between the spatial character of its virtual environments, the objects and information that populate those environments, and the gendered corporeality of the characters who inhabit them. All three games

were developed and distributed outside of the studio system that dominates the video game market, a position which frees them to experiment with representation and interactivity in ways rarely seen in mainstream games. By focusing on the relationship between composition and interactive exploration, the games invite their users to play with and reconsider their understanding of embodiment and gender, in both the worlds of the games and their own lives.

These three games share an epistolary nature, centered on questions of communication, representation, and gender, that sets them apart from the broader category of embedded narratives. Strikingly, each game uses its epistolary architecture to rethink a key structuring figure from the history of video games: the absent, or unseen, woman.

The exclusion of women from game narratives, most notably from mainstream releases, is an issue compounded by a common trope in which important female characters in game stories occupy non-interactive roles in gameplay. In the classic *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), for example, the player guides the titular Mario through the Mushroom Kingdom on a search for a princess who has been imprisoned in a castle by a giant, monstrous turtle creature, Bowser. Over the course of eight “worlds,” each with its own climactic battle in a castle, Mario is repeatedly told “our princess is in another castle.” By the time he reaches the princess and she speaks the words “your quest is over,” the interactive portion of the game is finished and the game itself simultaneously ends. This structure ensures that the princess can be spoken of, but cannot speak; the end of the quest but not part of it, she is present only to provide an endpoint to Mario’s endeavor and validate his success.<sup>4</sup>

The epistolary form of the novel is particularly ludic—or game-like—which may be why it seems to migrate across platforms so well and why epistolary style may be inherently suited to any narratives that play with questions of medium specificity, embodiment, and epistemology. Historically, and not unproblematically, the epistolary form has often been associated with women, and notably with female characters’ subjectivity and volition. In *Bientôt L’été*, this relationship is complicated by the player’s role in epistolary production.

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The opportunity to write a character's subjectivity into a novel that is presented in epistolary form, as well as the fact that this opportunity has historically given depiction to female subjectivity across media—from the novel to such classic films as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948) and *A Letter to Three Wives* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949) to video games—does seem to reflect a sociocultural desire to think through the subjectivity of female characters, tempered repeatedly by historical anxieties about the position of such experiences in narrative.

These games tend to be progressive in their formal innovations and, to varying degrees, conservative in their articulation of subjective experience. However, each game performs important work as a site of resistance against the marginalized roles for women that are still all too common in video games. Joe Bray has suggested that epistolary novels are attuned to questions of identity and individual development, most specifically to the “tensions that can be created by the letter-writer's past and present selves, and the uncertainties about identity that arise as a result.”<sup>5</sup> Each of these games interrogates these tensions, using epistolary architecture to develop accounts of subjectivity for characters of any gender that allow room for the uncertainty and fluidity of diachronic, embodied experience.

Each of these three games has resonances with both the epistolary form and other traditions of representation that explore selfhood and epistemology. *Dear Esther* makes use of the Romantic figure of the landscape as an emotive counterpoint to the agonized letters that its narrator composes. *Gone Home*, like the “survival horror” games to which it alludes, draws on the haunted houses of Victorian Gothic literature as a backdrop for its protagonist's explorations. *Bientôt L'été* evokes Marguerite Duras's novels and films, drawing on the *nouveau roman* tradition of experimentalist discovery through writing. In each case, these games incorporate transmedia resonances to frame medium-specific investigations into how epistolary architecture can help players feel their way toward new modes of embodied action, in games and beyond.

### **An Attic of One's Own in *Gone Home***

As *Gone Home* opens, its protagonist (and only player-controlled character), 20-year-old Kaitlin Greenbriar, returns to her family's home after a year abroad. While she was away, her parents and younger sister moved into a new house, formerly occupied by the father's estranged uncle. Thus, while Kaitlin is returning home, in a sense, she is also “returning” to a place where she has never lived. Her alienation is compounded by her discovery, upon arriving, that nobody is home, even though it is the middle of the night. Her younger sister Samantha has left a

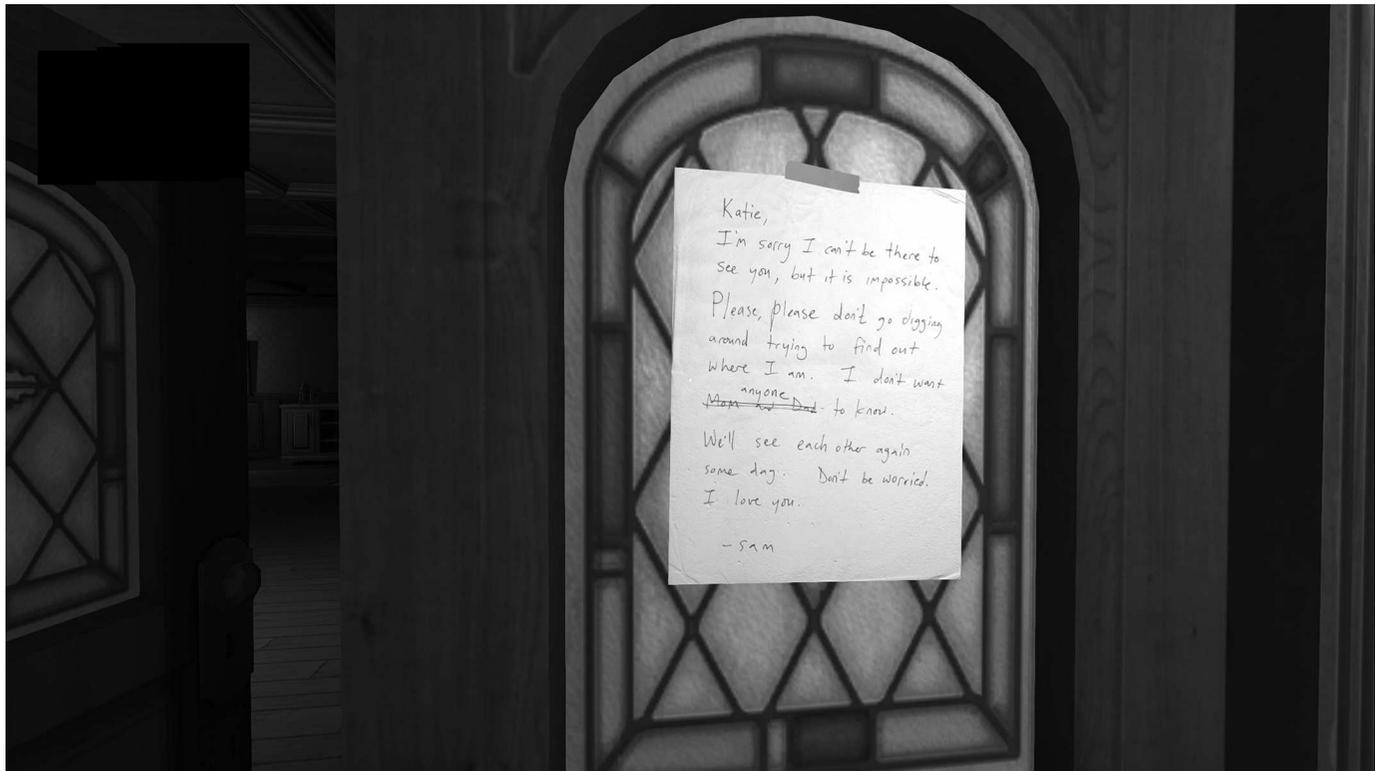
note imploring Kaitlin not to investigate her disappearance—which, of course, is what Kaitlin spends the rest of the game doing. Her inquiry quickly becomes an investigation into a tumultuous year that her entire family has endured, and furthermore into experiences of great psychological weight, some in the distant past, that have affected her parents' lives.

Roberta Rubenstein has identified home as “not merely a physical structure or geographical location but always an emotional space.”<sup>6</sup> Here, the game's setting immediately complicates the very concept of “home.” In a sense, Kaitlin is home in structure, location, and emotional space, but in each of these, she is also profoundly displaced. She has “gone home” to a home that has itself, in a very real way, already gone.

The domestic setting of *Gone Home* also connects it to a long history of representation in “women's novels” and the cinematic melodrama that aligns female characters with domestic spaces and maps aspects of their emotional lives onto the details and contents of those spaces. As Lora Romero has made clear, domestic space has complex resonances with the relationships between female activity and patriarchal power. While, historically, “domesticity may at points intersect and even collaborate with patriarchal power, that fact does not make the former reducible to the latter . . . [domesticity] produces a female subject in the act of resisting patriarchal power.”<sup>7</sup> The disruption of domestic space that initiates *Gone Home* further destabilizes the relationships between the physical and emotional space of home, between past and present selves, and between patriarchy and resistance. If “home” is as much a place actively made by the people in it as it is one controlled by ownership, then the family's move to an uncle's house might have been an opportunity for Samantha and her parents to attempt to begin anew, to re-create what it means for each of them to be home.

In the embedded plotline, in many ways the primary narrative of the game, Samantha undergoes a year of experimentation with her social and sexual identity, facilitated in part by her family's move. Samantha never appears in the game; in fact, no character is ever seen. They are only glimpsed in family portraits and on ID cards, never encountered in the flesh. The game is played from Kaitlin's optical point of view, but she is never visible onscreen. In this visual sense, Kaitlin is herself an “unseen woman,” and she is arguably somewhat of a cipher, present mainly as a figure of identification for the game's player. At times, however, this enactive inversion of the “unseen woman” dynamic recedes and Kaitlin's subjectivity becomes apparent, with her opinions and preferences expressed through the game's onscreen text narration or enacted through momentary manipulations of the game's control scheme.

*Gone Home* opens on the house's enclosed porch. The door is locked and the player must search for the spare key, which



**Gone Home: Samantha's note**

turns out to be hidden under a duck figurine inside a cupboard. Looking at the figurine causes Kaitlin to think, “Good ol’ Christmas Duck,” the first of many comments that differentiate her experience and perspective from those of the players who control her actions.

When Kaitlin enters the house, the first of a series of entries from “Sam’s journal” is heard in Samantha’s voice on the soundtrack. These entries are triggered by the player’s accessing new areas of the house or undertaking actions like picking up a particular object. They relate the story of Samantha’s relationship with her girlfriend Lonnie as it progresses from shared sensibility to deep affection to physical intimacy. At times, Kaitlin’s volition overrides the player’s own and she refuses to do what the player tries to make her do. For instance, when Kaitlin finds a sexually explicit note written by Samantha, the player has only a brief moment in which to read the page onscreen before Kaitlin puts it down and thinks, “Okay, not reading any more of that.” She refuses to look at the note again, no matter how often the player may try to make her do so.

In the journal entries, Samantha recounts her parents’ opposition to the relationship and her other troubles with family life in Kaitlin’s absence. The source of the voiceovers remains ambiguous until the end of the game, when they are revealed to be words from a journal that Samantha composed and left in the attic for Kaitlin to find. The game concludes

when Kaitlin finds the journal, at which point the first entry is heard again in voiceover. In a complex and unusual way, the journal entries thus supersede game time: they are composed prior to the point at which the gameplay begins, and recount events from before their composition. However, as Kaitlin only finds the journal in the attic at the end of the game, the voiceovers represent a conveyance of information that occurs *after* the gameplay ends—unlike, for instance, the princess in *Super Mario Bros.* who ultimately serves to end the game.

When Jenkins argues that a spatial story is “less a temporal structure than a body of information,” he shows how works in many media distribute information about their worlds across time and space.<sup>8</sup> By distributing this information via a series of triggered voiceovers, *Gone Home* uses its audio track to establish a difference in range of knowledge between players of the game and their character, Kaitlin. Unlike a game such as *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007), in which the protagonist learns about the destruction of an undersea colony by examining objects found in its ruins, information about the past in *Gone Home* is meted out to the player as the game progresses, but withheld from Kaitlin until the game ends. The ‘reveal’ thereby transcends game time, and the game instead centers on the complex mechanics of a communicative act between two sisters.



***Gone Home*: Kaitlin remembers Christmas Duck**

Because of Kaitlin’s privileged position—as older, as having been away, and as being a (partial) cipher controlled by a player—she is able to “receive” her sister’s communiqué, a transaction that serves as an act of resistance to the usual subjugation of young women in the patriarchally circumscribed domestic sphere as well as an act of appropriation of “home” in Samantha’s choice of a place to hide and to compose her messages: the house’s attic.

Kaitlin makes surprising discoveries about her mother and her father, as well. The house, still full of half-unpacked boxes, belonged to her great-uncle for many years, and clues remain about his life and her father’s childhood. Many of these take the form of communications *not* directed to Kaitlin, and thus represent another variety of epistolary style. While Kaitlin must snoop through other people’s things in order to find the journal that her sister wants her to see, she is also in a position to read private documents and communications between her parents and their friends and associates.

Through the game’s broader investigation (largely optional for players whose goal is merely to complete the game) a fuller portrait of Kaitlin’s parents and their own concerns emerges. The house thus functions as a spatialization of information, in Jenkins’s terms, but also as a materialized form of character development. The player sees something of these characters—and, to a lesser degree, Kaitlin—in the objects

that are important to them and in their articulations of their own perspectives through letters, notes, and journals. The mother has had an emotional dalliance with a coworker, for instance, and the father seems to have been abused as a child by the uncle whose house he now occupies. The house is saturated by the residue of these events, yet none is static: in each of these embedded and epistolary narratives, a temporal progression emerges. Process and change are part of how players understand these people whom they never meet.

Aesthetically, *Gone Home* draws heavily from the “survival horror” genre characterized by video games like the *Resident Evil* series (Capcom, 1996–) and *Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002). Yet while *Gone Home* continually prompts players to expect horrors, they never materialize. A storm rages outside, floorboards creak, red hair dye in a bathtub initially reads as blood. However, the game takes place in a quotidian world. There are no antagonists, natural or supernatural, and there is no way to die or to fail at the game. Its focus is on exploration, action, and understanding. The only way to lose is not to play.

### **One-way Correspondence in *Dear Esther***

In *Dear Esther*, the player guides a character, in first-person perspective, along a semilinear path that traverses an island in



***Gone Home*: a remnant of the father's childhood**

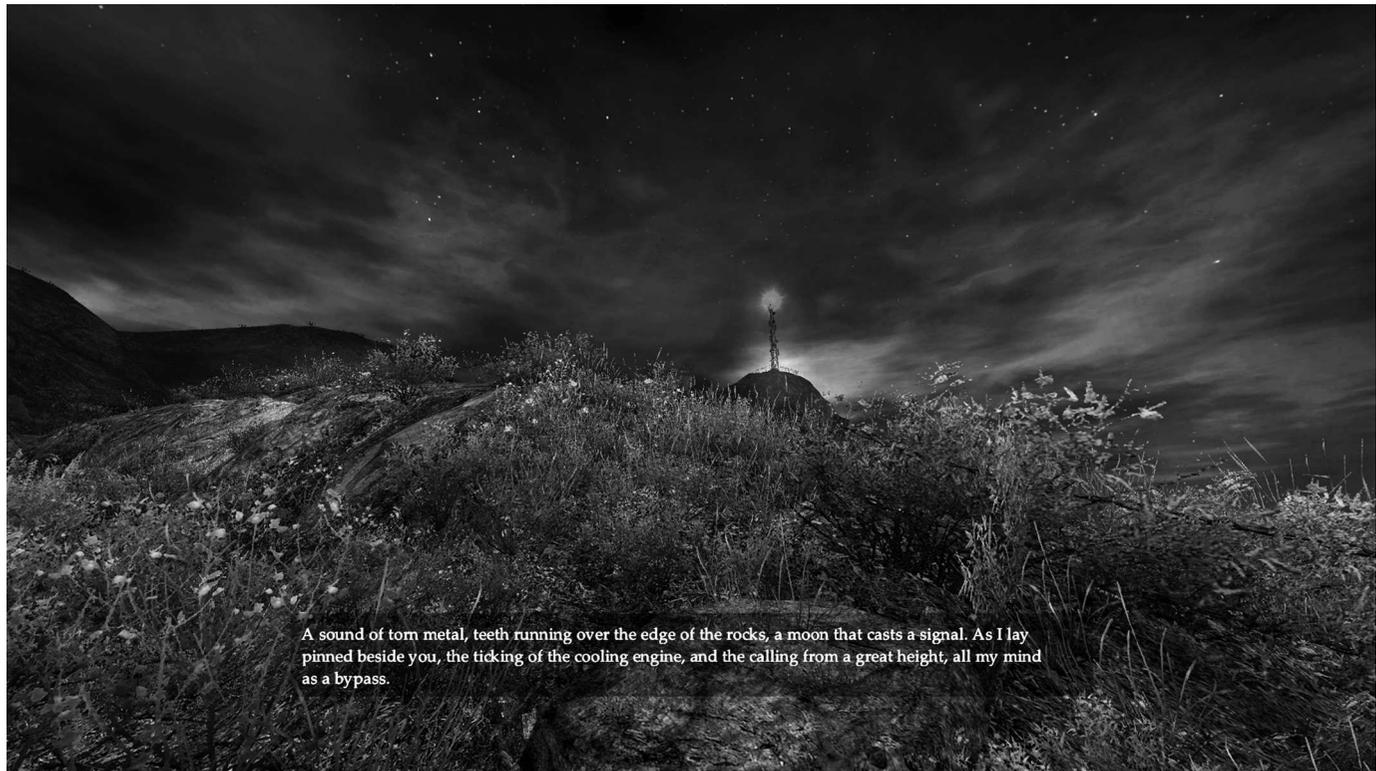
the Hebrides. As new areas are discovered, a fractured back-story is recounted in the voice of a male protagonist whose identity remains ambiguous throughout the game. Connections are never resolved between the island's mysterious man-made and natural structures, the actions of the player-controlled character, or the voiceover, addressed as a letter to the eponymous Esther.

*Dear Esther* fits into a subgenre of video games that might be called “island exploration” games, in which characters find themselves on seemingly deserted islands and explore them, looking for clues as to what happened in the islands’ pasts and what systems govern the islands’ presents. Besides *Myst*, such recent games as *Proteus* (Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013) and *The Witness* (Thekla, forthcoming) embody in their diegetic worlds a spatial limitation that pertains to most games. Since they are constituted by data stored on media such as discs, cartridges, and hard drives, most game worlds necessarily have limits different from the worlds of photographs and films. Stanley Cavell wrote that a photograph is “of reality or nature,” that it lets one intuit that there is a world around (and behind) the limits of what is represented.<sup>9</sup> Video games do not usually elicit the same reaction, because they are, by necessity, products of design, closer in this respect to paintings, which Cavell identifies as worlds in themselves. Thus, the boundaries of game worlds can often be clearly mapped. In *Gone Home*,

the playable world is identical to the limits of the house that Kaitlin explores. The game begins inside the porch and ends in the attic. The players never leave the house, nor can they. The diegesis extends beyond the house, but the gameplay does not. In *Dear Esther*, the limits of the game’s world are roughly the limits of the island. Players can venture a short way into the surf but if they go further, they are soon submerged beneath the surface, the screen fades to black, a voice beckons “come back,” and they are deposited again near the shore.

Such invisible “walls” abound in video games, as they are one of the only ways to keep players within the limits of the world as programmed. Games set on islands can narrativize these limitations, explaining the limits of the game world by way of the limits of the land mass, whereas games like *Gone Home* must rely on conventions like inexplicably locked doors and impassable corridors to constrain movement. Indeed, many larger-scale games are set on islands for just this reason. The pseudo-California of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar, 2013) is an island, as are the parallel New York City and Newark of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar, 2008), making the United States of the *GTA* series into an archipelago of city-states.

*Dear Esther* is less concerned with puzzle-solving or narrative intervention than are many other island exploration games. The player can only control the motion of the character



A sound of tom metal, teeth running over the edge of the rocks, a moon that casts a signal. As I lay pinned beside you, the ticking of the cooling engine, and the calling from a great height, all my mind as a bypass.

#### ***Dear Esther*: Radio tower and elaborate metaphor**

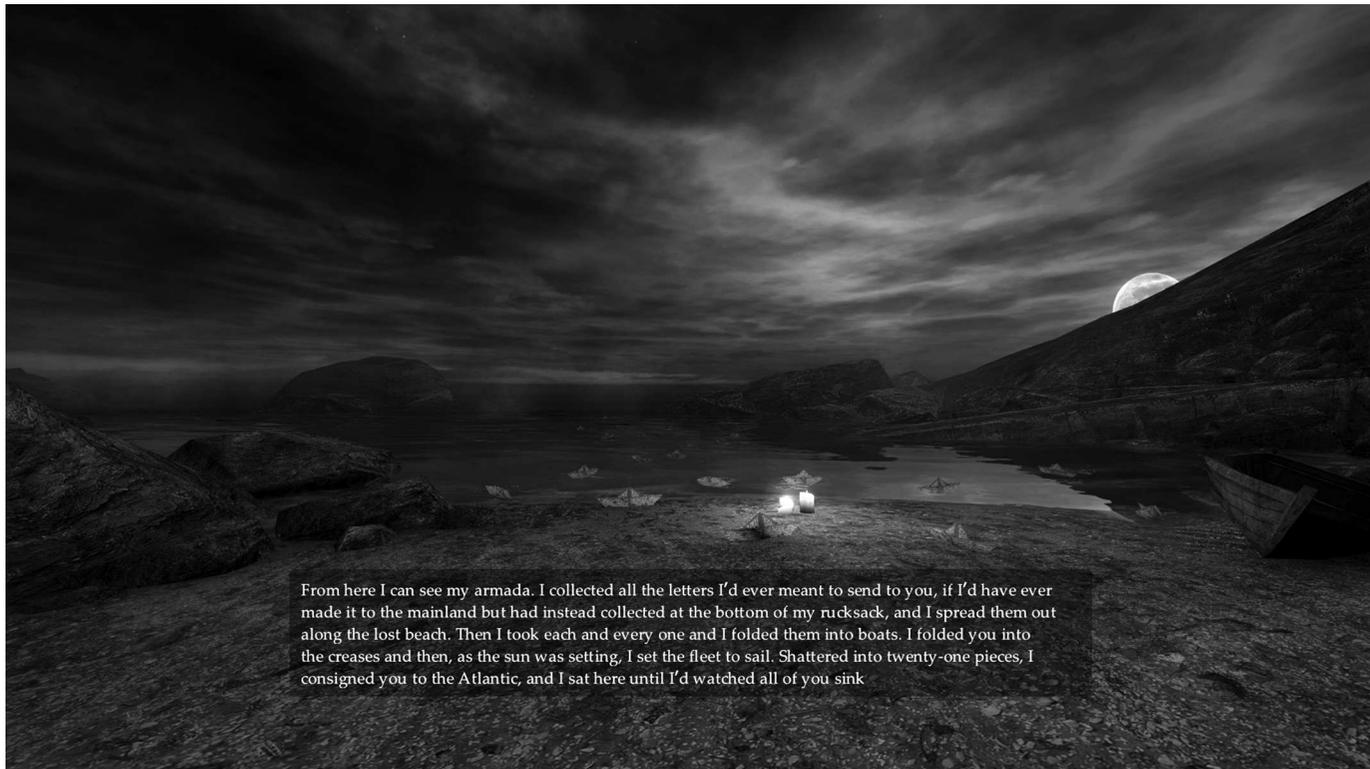
through space and guide the direction of the character's gaze. A button click zooms the view in slightly, but it is impossible to pick up or manipulate objects in the game world. The only option is to walk through it. Doing so, the player moves along the island's rocky shores, up a cliff face and into a valley, through a series of damp caves, along the far shore of the island, and finally up another incline to a radio tower previously glimpsed in the distance. As the player approaches the base of the tower, the game takes control and the player can only observe, still from a first-person perspective, as the character climbs the tower and jumps from it, falling down a cliff face but swooping upward at the last minute to fly along the shore as music swells and the game fades to black.

Is this a game about suicide? It is unclear, as are many details of *Dear Esther*, right down to the identity of its protagonist and the nature of its setting. This ambiguity is underscored by cryptic messages that occur throughout the game, triggered by the player's progression through the game's space and simultaneously spoken by a man in voiceover and shown onscreen as text. These messages are letters to an unseen woman named Esther, which begin by describing the island and its history and gradually encompass a small cast of characters, including the narrator and Esther. Along with clues found on the island, they provide hints about the history of the narrator (who may or may not be the character that the player is controlling),

his relationship to Esther, and a tragedy that seems to have befallen them. There has been a car accident on England's M5 motorway and Esther is comatose or dead. The narrator grows disoriented by grief as he dictates a series of messages full of increasingly mixed metaphors and progressively more reference to his own body. As the narrator tries to make sense of his desperate situation, his understanding of corporeality, perception, and space become confused. In a late message, he raves:

There are headlights reflected in these retinas, too long in the tunnels of my island without a bottom. The sea creatures have risen to the surface, but the gulls are not here to carry them back to their nests. I have become fixed: open and staring, an eye turned on itself. I have become an infected leg, whose tracking lines form a perfect map of the junctions of the M5. I will take the exit at mid-thigh and plummet to my Esther.

Out of this thematic jumble rises a frustration with the limits of language, which the game posits as limiting to life, but not as determining its absolute limits. The narrator's pain at the loss of Esther has rendered him inarticulate but compelled to write; toward the end of the game the player sees his letters to Esther, folded into toy sailboats and set adrift as an "armada" off the coast of the island. As in *Gone Home*, the



From here I can see my armada. I collected all the letters I'd ever meant to send to you, if I'd have ever made it to the mainland but had instead collected at the bottom of my rucksack, and I spread them out along the lost beach. Then I took each and every one and I folded them into boats. I folded you into the creases and then, as the sun was setting, I set the fleet to sail. Shattered into twenty-one pieces, I consigned you to the Atlantic, and I sat here until I'd watched all of you sink

***Dear Esther*: The narrator's "armada"**

secondary narrative becomes primary, but here, one does not have a clear understanding of what happened—or of what exactly is transpiring in the primary narrative. Is it a series of literal events suffused with symbolic meaning, a complete fantasia of the narrator, or, perhaps, a hallucination seen and heard by the dying Esther? It is ultimately unclear.

The unseen woman has a different function in *Dear Esther* than she does in *Gone Home*. In the latter, players learn of Samantha's current whereabouts by retracing her activities and thoughts over the last year or so, and they gradually get a sense of both what she has done and why she has done it. The unseen Samantha thereby becomes a protagonist by proxy, while Kaitlin has little narrative arc beyond her exploration of the house. Samantha's ending, though open in a sense, is a classical happy ending in which two young lovers run away to find their fortune together. By contrast, Esther's narrative is both unclear and unresolved. A focal point for the game's verbal and geographical explorations, she is neither someone to be rescued nor someone to be found. *Dear Esther* thus eschews the classical model of the unseen woman while maintaining some of its superficial characteristics. The game is less concerned with a quest for discovery than with attempts to communicate and the contingencies, interruptions, and complications that stifle them. It uses motion through space as a mode less for discovery of facts than for articulation

of ideas. Its embodied notion of the mind, in which negotiating space and negotiating language are complementary endeavors, connects to both a British tradition of walking (and thinking) through landscapes and a Romantic tradition of landscapes as external figurations of inner states.

While communication is a central thematic concern of both games, *Gone Home* is more concerned with positivistically laying out the facts in order: who felt what and when, who interfered with whom, and what happened as a result. *Dear Esther* is more involved in epistemological considerations, such as what can and cannot be known, how knowledge is communicated, and what (if anything) of another's knowledge can be understood. The gendering of its major characters seems to fall along typical video game lines, with a male protagonist and a female deuteragonist, but this relationship is complicated by the ambiguity of the character the player is controlling, who is either the narrator or Esther herself, as she hears his messages and takes stock of her own bodily state. What seem to be reenacted memories that occasionally interrupt the game only blur things further, making ambiguous the distinctions between the player, the narrator, and Esther. This challenge to embodied selfhood is also a challenge to normative gender, as the game concludes with the narrator's decision to "abandon this body and take to the

air” following a series of ruminations on mortality, injury, disease, and bodily difference.

It is no coincidence that the game ends at a radio tower. Where the body and language end, it seems to say, true communication begins. The player has been walking toward, and the narrator writing toward, a moment of release from embodiment, action, and composition. Writing is thus foregrounded as a way of being. By moving through the game’s subterranean environments and its revisitations of murky memories, players arrive at a moment of disembodiment and de-gendering in which desire for communion and desire for communication become identical.

Where *Gone Home* looked to letters *from* an unseen woman for factual understanding, *Dear Esther* uses letters *to* an unseen woman as a means of tacit understanding. Its narrative is ambiguous and metaphorical, but its gameplay is relatively straightforward. *Gone Home* emphasizes free exploration of a space in search of clarity, while *Dear Esther* is linear in its construction. Paths fork occasionally, but always loop back toward themselves or quickly dead-end. The game is a walk along a predetermined path with little left to player choice other than how much to linger along the way. There are no puzzles or objects to be manipulated.

Jenkins compares narrative architecture in games to the layouts of amusement park rides, which whisk their characters through space and also through time. The narrative of Disneyland’s “Pirates of the Caribbean” ride, for example, unfolds as passengers are transported from one place to another, with different places in the ride corresponding to different times in the narrative. In games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, narrative events are triggered by the player’s arrival at designated places, meaning that the narrative advances at a pace partly determined by player action. *Dear Esther* is more like an amusement park ride, in that the player cannot effect any change in the world of the game by moving through it. The game is interactive, but its world is not. Esther is positioned outside of the game, and outside of its world, but rather than holding her aside as a narrative or ludic goal, as in *Super Mario Bros.*, the game seeks to meditate on how individuals can ever expect to understand one another. Esther is not the game’s object, but a multifaceted and ambiguous subject, as central to the text as the narrator himself. Through its epistolary architecture, the game allows players to occupy the position classically occupied by the unseen women of video games: parenthetical, marginalized, but profoundly invested.

Players of *Dear Esther* have control over the motion of the game and some modicum of control over the pace of its

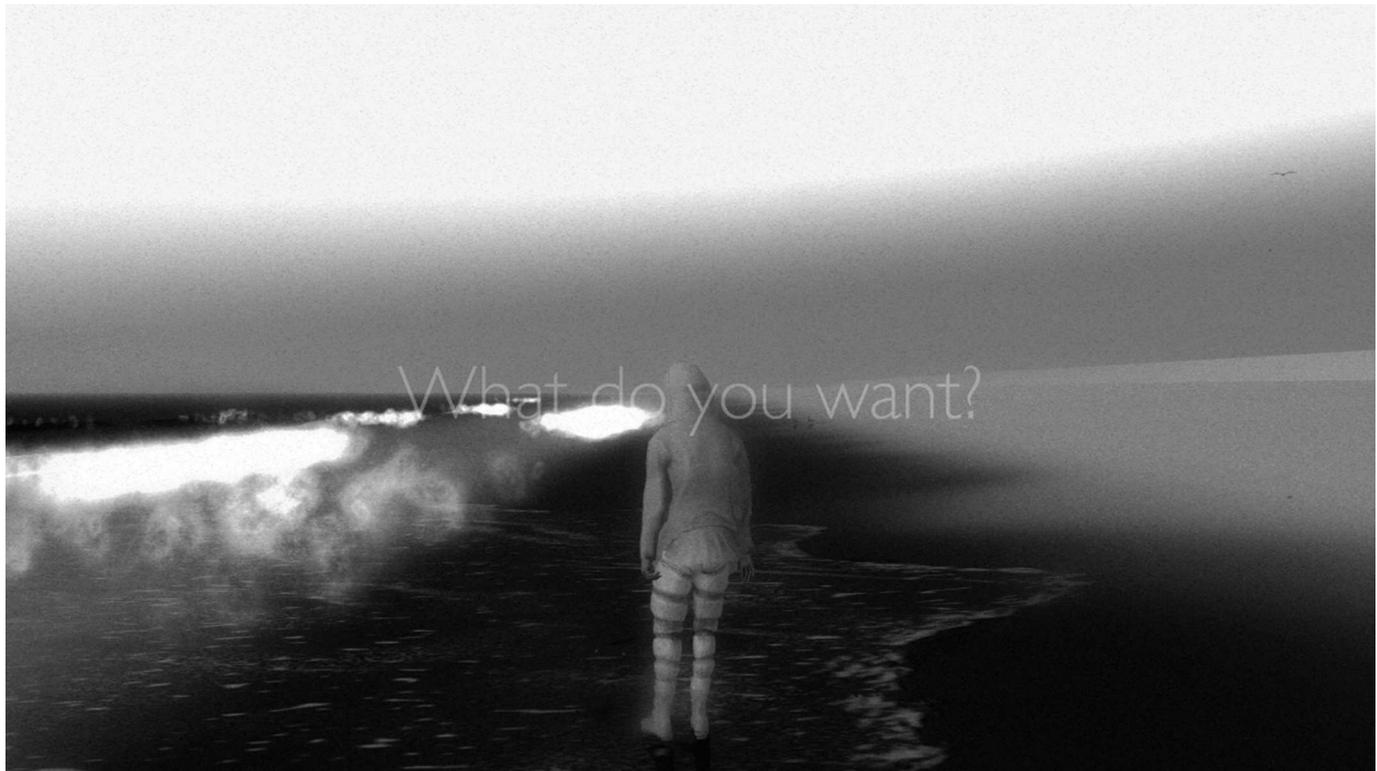
revelation of information, but no control over the content of the messages being sent. *Bientôt L’été* goes further, for it affords such control and thus moves its locus of action from discovery to production.

### Constrained Composition in *Bientôt L’été*

The action of *Bientôt L’été* takes place in two primary locations, a short strip of seashore and a room in a building near the beach. The game’s framing material makes it clear that both locations are supposed to be computer simulations within the world of the game, although the game itself only hints at this information. The backstory is that the player’s character is separated from his or her lover by light-years and has the opportunity to communicate with him or her through a virtual-reality chessboard. The alienation of the narrative situation is complemented by obscurantism in the game’s visual design and extreme constraint of the player’s interactive capacity. Players cannot move very far up or down the shore, an invisible wall blocks their motion in both directions and keeps them from moving inland, and they can only take a few steps into the surf before their motion in that direction is stopped, too. The narrative architecture of this game is a near-inversion of the spatialization found in much game storytelling. The character stands more or less in one place while verbal information is brought to him or her in the form of phrases that sweep ashore like driftwood. If the player positions the avatar near the water, each wave brings a phrase, which is displayed on the screen and spoken on the soundtrack.

Language is hardly incidental to *Bientôt L’été*, since as noted it is based on the writings and films of Marguerite Duras, and its phrases—drawn from her novels—share the wistful, elegiac, and oblique tone of much of her writing. Alienation and the difficulties of communication are major themes in Duras’s films, stories, and plays, which often embody their characters’ physical and psychological alienation in a fractured prose style.<sup>10</sup> There is always a charged relationship between people and places in which the ambiguity of the settings commingles with the ambiguity of their relationships with one another. *Bientôt* draws upon these themes, as well as on the specifically cinematic tone characteristic of much of Duras’s work as a screenwriter and director.

In tone and setting, *Bientôt L’été* is perhaps closest to Duras’s film *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (*Agatha and the Unlimited Readings*, 1981), in which a man and woman talk about their impressions of the world and their relationship at a house near a seashore. They are seen infrequently, as the screen is usually filled with landscape shots, similar to the beach scenery in the single-player parts of *Bientôt*. The use of an onscreen avatar in



*Bientôt L'été*: A phrase washes ashore

*Bientôt* marks a point of departure from Duras's priorities and style, as it creates a one-to-one correspondence between what the player does with the mouse and keyboard and what the onscreen character does. Its characters thus become figures for our action (action figures!), which is hardly the case in Duras's writing or filmmaking.

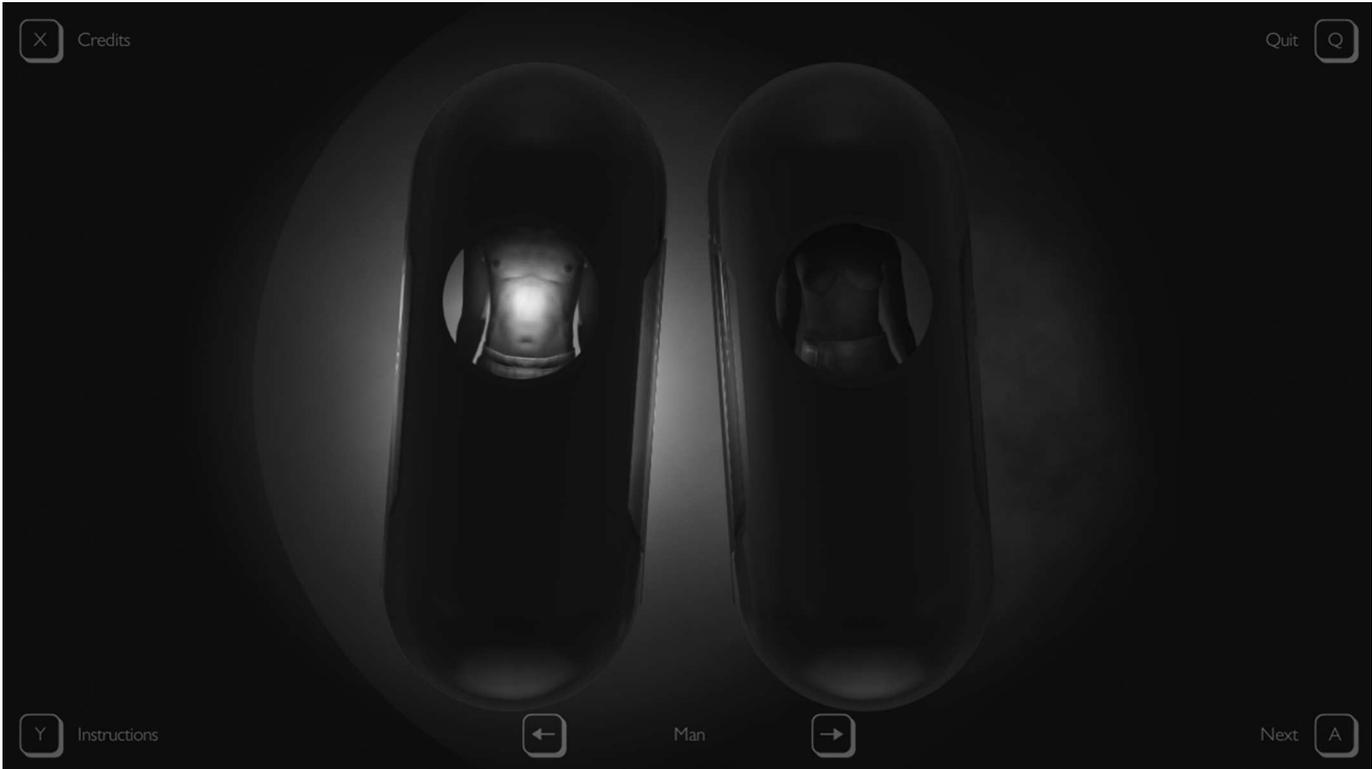
The presence of an onscreen avatar also differentiates *Bientôt L'été* from *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*, which are both played from a first-person perspective, so players never see their characters onscreen. *Bientôt*, on the other hand, foregrounds its protagonist not only by placing him or her onscreen but by emphasizing the importance of the avatar's gendered body. Via a character-selection screen that initiates each gameplay session, the player always begins by being confronted with a binary choice: man or woman? Naked torsos of a man and a woman are displayed in the windows of a pair of 2001-style hibernation pods until a choice is made, when the corresponding pod begins to open and the scene transitions to the beach.

On the beach, the player is presented with a few options: walk around the rectangle of the setting, enter the structure that sits opposite the shore, examine an object that appears in the sand (a dead seagull, perhaps, or a construction crane), or close the character's eyes. Standing near the water, the player can faintly see and hear cryptic phrases washed up by the

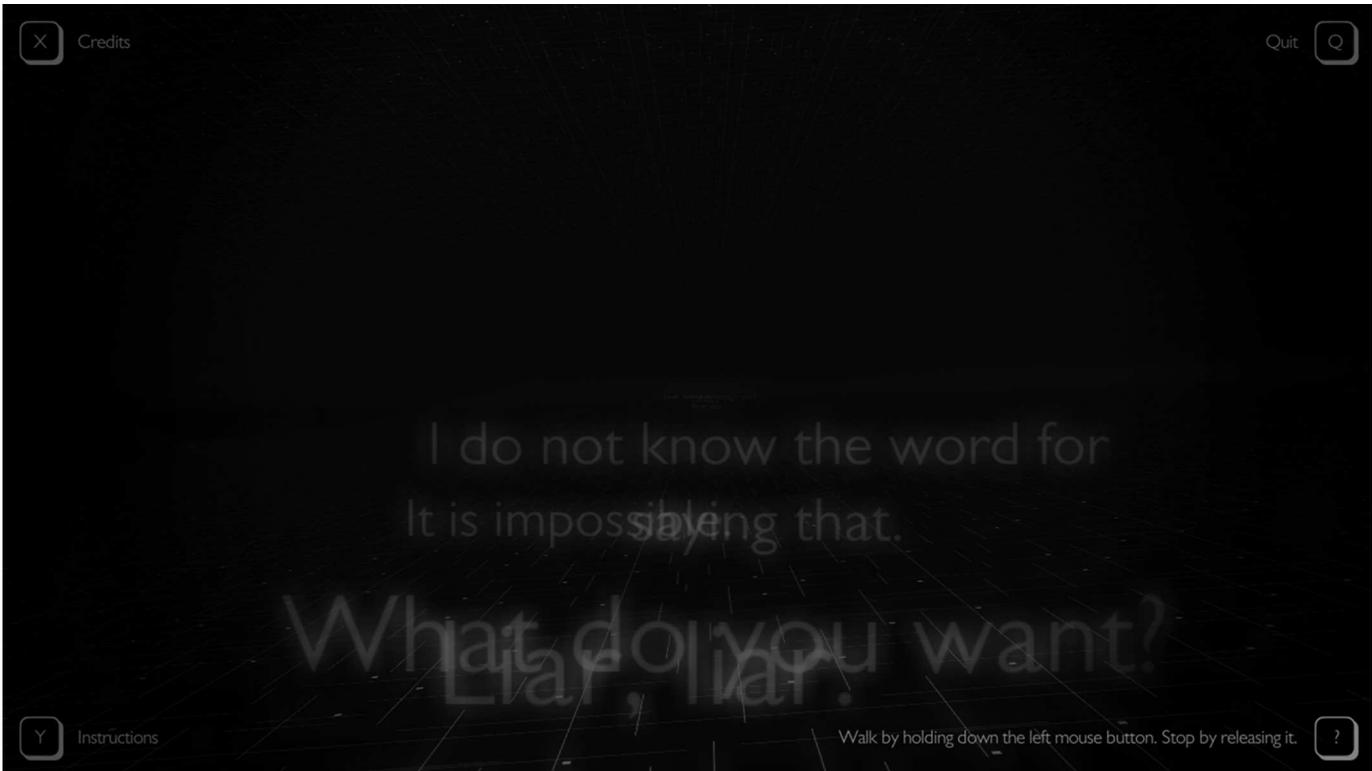
waves: "Sometimes during the day, I end up imagining myself without you," or "liar, liar," or "I thought I had foreseen everything." These phrases quickly fade from visibility, but closing the character's eyes makes them more readily visible and allows the player to view all of the accumulated phrases washed up on the shore.

Entering the building on the beach initiates a transition to the game's second setting, an ostensibly multiplayer environment where the player is matched up in conversation with another player or with a computer-simulated interlocutor. A conversation then obliquely proceeds. Looking down at a chessboard, the player is given the option of placing a piece on the board, drinking wine, or smoking a Gauloises cigarette, or of playing one of an offered selection of songs. Squares on the chessboard correspond to the phrases that have washed up on the beach, and placing a piece on a square causes the character to speak that phrase aloud. Each of these actions constitutes a turn, after which the other side makes a move. The conversation proceeds until one of the players decides to leave the building and return to the beach to collect new phrases.

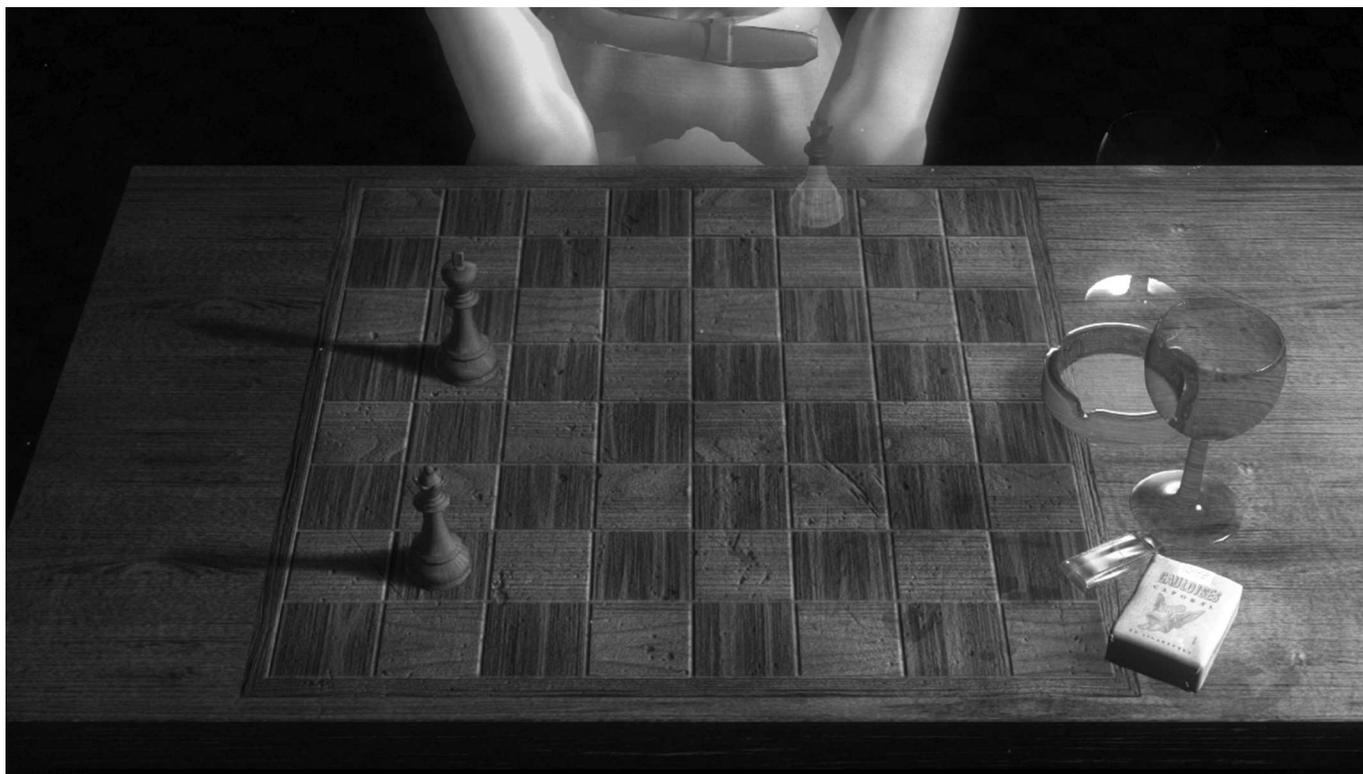
This constitutes the entirety of the gameplay. As in *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*, there is no way to lose in *Bientôt L'été*. Unlike in those games, there is also no way to win or to complete the narrative: the game will seemingly go on for



*Bientôt L'été*: Hibernation pods and gender differentiation



*Bientôt L'été*: The beach through closed eyes



*Bientôt L'été*: Conversation via chessboard

as long as the player wants to continue playing. *Bientôt L'été* has a number of key differences from the other two games. In its atypical qualities, *Bientôt L'été* reveals some of what epistolary architecture does for games and what games, in a more general sense, do for their users, and it demonstrates the extent to which epistolary architecture is a distinct kind of narrative architecture. Material forms of communication (most notably acts of recounting) are arranged in game space, where finding and interpreting materials constitutes not just a reconstruction of relevant story information but also of the embodied acts—often markedly gendered—that created them. Players act not merely as investigators piecing together factual information in order to get a “complete” version of a story but also as explorers of the boundaries of affect in communication.

By identifying *Bientôt L'été* with epistolary architecture, I claim its linkages to other games that employ this design technique. However, it is the only one of the three games in which players have a choice about what messages to send or communicative actions to perform, including the nonverbal language of smoking, drinking, and putting on music. With the player, rather than the characters in the narrative, choosing how and when to speak, the spatial arrangement of language in the game takes a different form and fulfills a different purpose.

Alternating between the exterior seascape and interior lounge, players also alternate between an interior mindscape and exterior interpersonal encounter. In the lounge, the player is free to deploy only those phrases that have washed in from the sea, that have previously occurred in the beach scene and thus appeared *to* the character. The interpersonal relationship being addressed, and the events being referenced, are immaterial in every sense of the word. In fact, they are nonexistent, and every extradiegetic relationship that the game enables, either between two randomly matched players or between a player and a computer, is likewise constituted only in the moment at which the match is made. Any shared history or common communicative ground implied by the messages, aside from the common ground of a shared language, is itself a fiction.

*Bientôt L'été* thereby uses its epistolary architecture to do the opposite of what detective-style narrative architecture does. Its focus is squarely on the present, and on how objects, words, and messages are *not* charged with informational or emotional meaning. In this respect, it enters into a rather different relationship with embodiment and gender. *Bientôt L'été* initially foregrounds gender and the body—and communication, and the self—only to show how these are in fact illusions, in this case simulations within a diegetic computer program that is itself a simulation within . . . a diegetic computer program.

## Ludic Form Across Media

Each of the three games revises the terms of gendered communication in video games, using epistolary architecture to trouble common tropes of characterization and narrative. The epistolary form is so well-suited to video game storytelling that perhaps there is something inherently ludic about it. Jenkins has suggested that video games can help players to think of stories as bodies of information rather than as ordered recountings of causally linked events. The epistolary architecture of games like *Gone Home*, *Dear Esther*, and *Bientôt L'été* can be effective at organizing an affective experience that provides players with an intuitive, emotional understanding, both linguistic and non-linguistic, of the contents and the stakes of communicative acts. The games are less concerned with information, or even with the recounting of clear narratives, than with evoking feelings about the act of communication itself.

In *Gone Home*, Samantha's attempts to communicate are a way of finding her voice as a person, and Kaitlin's attempts to find and understand Samantha's messages are ultimately attempts to reconstruct a more whole version of Samantha, with a new understanding of her sister as a living, emotional, and sexual being. In *Dear Esther*, the narrator's confused state is reflected in the content of the letters and also in their arrangement around the game's space, not as physical objects but as *something*—ideas? memories?—triggered by the player's navigation of the island's varied environments. In *Bientôt L'été*, the act of communication is partially disembodied, as its raw materials come from without—washed in at random by the sea—but their ordering and use are in the hands of the player. The player thus has an opportunity to produce a (limited) communicative act in a way that gets him or her close to the skin of the world of the game, and the mechanics of its limitations and affordances become crucially important, and evident, to any attempt to act within them.

In each case, what surfaces are the gender norms of video games as an historical medium and the binariness of gender as a more general construct challenged by narrative events as well as by stylistic and formal constructions. Without resorting to a mere reversal of the “unseen woman” by constructing a woman who is pointedly *seen*, each game instead interrogates invisibility itself, asking both what one can ever truly see and what it could mean to be “seen.” In so doing, they give characters, and players, room to make themselves, to construct their own identities through how they see, so that the unseen woman becomes not so much a seen woman as a *seeing person*.

As collections of “evidence” embedded in and originating from a broader narrative, epistolary novels and stories address their readers in ways that are overtly ludic as compared to the modes of engagement encouraged by conventional

novels and stories. They ask readers to move from one piece of material to the next, assessing their relationship to one another and inferring the events implied therein and the impulses that led to their composition. In this respect, their readers are asked to think more about the act of writing than they might be in other modes of narration. This reflexivity inherent to epistolary form mirrors the unavoidable reflexivity of interactive media that tell stories about interaction with media. Video game play is *always* a task of reverse-engineering, as players strategically attempt to optimize their interaction with a set of human-designed rules. For this reason, tacit thought about the “authoredness” of video games fundamentally underlies all interactions with them. This is largely true of reading and watching other media as well, but this quality of novels and films tends to be noticeable only when foregrounded in such texts as epistolary novels, puzzle films, and complex narratives.<sup>11</sup>

Each of these games is somewhat conventional in its conception of subjective experience, but also quite radical in its willingness to experiment with the representational norms of interactive media. Through the inherent reflexivity of written stories about writing, and of interactive media telling stories about the enactive limitations of their characters, these games both rethink the specificity of video games as a medium and think beyond gender and visibility to a more pragmatic conception of what it can mean to act—to perceive, to conceive, and to communicate—within an environment constrained by physicality, communication, gender, and a sense of oneself as a volitional being. The fact that they tell stories that engage with narrative themes of gender identity is almost incidental to the fact that they let users play with what it is to see, to communicate, and to feel as a being, both within and beyond issues relating to gender. In this sense, they are as progressive as can be, for they hardwire epistemological experimentation into their epistolary architectures.

## Notes

1. Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *First Person*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 122. The relationship between gameplay and storytelling troubled early video game theory, leading to debate over which (if either) was the defining characteristic of the medium. In this influential essay, Jenkins suggests narrative architecture as a way to reconcile gameplay with storytelling, and as a way to rethink the roles that fictional spaces play in narrative, no matter the medium.
2. More information about the games and their developers is available on their respective websites. *Gone Home*: [www.gonehomegame.com](http://www.gonehomegame.com); *Dear Esther*: [//dear-esther.com](http://dear-esther.com); *Bientôt L'été*: [//tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete](http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete).

3. Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 126.
4. This is not to say that female characters never have important or vocal roles in mainstream video games, for they do, especially in the last decade or so. Samus Aran, the protagonist of the *Metroid* series (1986–), is a relatively early example, though the revelation that she is female is unfortunately sexualized. The more efficiently a player finishes the first game, the more armor Samus removes at the end. The "best" ending has her in a bikini. More recent, and less problematic, examples include the photojournalist Jade in *Beyond Good and Evil* (Ubisoft, 2002), the rebellious test subject Chell from the *Portal* series (Valve, 2007–), and the budding survivalist Ellie from *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). Each of these characters is active in determining her fate and reshaping her situation, and each game refuses to simplify the roles that gender relations can play in such a struggle. For an extensive discussion of the marginalized roles that women have historically occupied in video games, cf. the ongoing video essay series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (Anita Sarkeesian, 2013–).
5. Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.
6. Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 1.
7. Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 78.
8. Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 126.
9. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16.
10. Note that such a tone predates this Duras homage for the game-makers. *Bientôt L'été* was created by a Belgian game developer called Tale of Tales. Their best-known previous work is *The Graveyard* (2008), a minimalist game in which the player controls an elderly woman as she slowly walks across a graveyard.
11. Cf. Warren Buckland, *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and Jason Mittell "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, no. 1 (2006): 29–40. In each case, complexity not only enriches the text but also turns viewers' minds to the act of the text's creation. The epistolary novel and the video game achieve something similar without the narrational convolutions of complex visual storytelling.