»Do you see it now? Do you see it like I do?«
Unreliability and the Unstable Narrating Mind
in *Dear Esther* (2012) and *Layers of Fear* (2016)

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Abstract: After drawing connections between theories of unreliable narration and depictions of mental instability, this article explores ways in which subjectivity can become manifest in video games. In the subsequent analysis of *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team 2016), the mechanisms of verbal and visual unreliable narration will be examined, as well as the interplay between these elements and interactivity, and, especially, how these aspects are connected to the mental instability of narrators and focalizers. *Dear Esther's* narrator strives to inscribe an island's ›always half-imagined‹ surface with his life and memories, while the player is compelled to question the narrator's reliability to the point where she begins to question the island's physical existence. *Layers of Fear* puts the player in the place of a painter who, while trying to complete his magnum opus, loses all grasp of reality – and his sanity. The game exclusively ascribes the painter, the sole focalizer of the game, the ability to ›see‹ and simultaneously establishes that his eyes are not to be trusted.

Keywords: Unreliable Narration; Madness; Dear Esther; Layers of Fear

Schlagworte: Unzuverlässiges Erzählen; Wahnsinn; Dear Esther; Layers of Fear

1.   Introduction

Unreliable narration is a phenomenon which has been discussed excessively in academic discourse since the 1960s. Renowned literature and film scholars like Seymour Chatman, Wayne C. Booth, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan have weighed in on the controversy of what it is that makes a narrator unreliable. One thing is beyond dispute, however: Unreliable narration surrounds us. One could easily transform Roland Barthes's statement that the »narratives of the world are numberless« (1975, 237) and argue that the *unreliable* narratives of the world are numberless as well. This is due to the fact that unreliability is concerned with one of the

paramount questions of the human condition, namely the negotiation of deviance from certain norms, whichever shape these may take. Unreliability is inextricably tied to aspects of ›verisimilitude,‹ ›sanity,‹ ›decency,‹ and ›normalcy‹ – and the problem of finding a yardstick by which these concepts should be measured: »[T]he traditional notion of unreliability presupposes that an objective view of the world, of others, and of oneself can be attained« (Nünning 2005, 96). This idea needs to be problematized of course, since, »[i]n a pluralist and multiculturalist age[,] it has become more difficult than ever before to determine what may count as ›normal‹ moral or psychological standards« (Nünning 1997, 101). Ergo, what is considered to be ›normal‹ or ›decent‹ is inherently established by a cultural, religious, social, or political hegemony and is bound to differ greatly between groups and from individual to individual.

It has been argued that unreliable narration mainly serves to draw attention to »certain elements of the narrator's psychology« (Wall 1994, 21), which is often meant to relate to mental instability. William Riggan, for example, establishes a connection »between a deviant or deranged mind and unreliability« (Shen 2013) in *Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs, and Clowns* (Riggan 1981). Depictions of madness,[1] some of which are as ancient as cultural expression itself, »convey in symbolic form human beings' preoccupation with their own mental functioning« (Feder 1980, 4). The perseverative re-visitation of »the fear of collapse, the sense of dissolution« (Gilman 1988, 1), which not only relates to mental instability, but to all illnesses, has one specific purpose:

> [W]e project this fear onto the world in order to localize it and, indeed, to domesticate it. For once we locate it, the fear of our own dissolution is removed. Then it is not we who totter on the brink of collapse, but rather the Other. […] The images of disease, whether in art or in literature, are not in flux, even though they represent collapse. They are solid, fixed images that remain constantly external to our sense of self. (Gilman 1988, 1-2)

Even though the human condition urges us to draw a line between ›normal‹ and ›deviant‹ in order to gain the upper hand against the fear of madness as the »perpetual amorphous threat within« (Feder 1980, 4), madness is also »familiar« (ibid.),

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1   My employment of the word *madness*, which »carries the semantic cores ›deviation‹ (of behaviour, utterances, reasoning etc.) and ›mental state‹« (Bernaerts 2008, 187), in this article is deliberate. It means to foreground the fact that I do not refer to real, existing mental illnesses but to societal constructs of deviation from perceived norms which are negotiated in fiction. I neither have a medical background, nor do I support the notion that the mental state of characters in literature, films, games etc. can be truly diagnosed through a psychiatric approach. Therefore, one must be constantly aware that the concept of madness is »charged with centuries of political, social, religious, medical, and personal assumptions« (Feder 1980, 5).

intimately recognizable in ourselves. It is the »fascinating and repellent exposure of the structures of dream and fantasy, of irrational fears and bizarre desires ordinarily hidden from the world and the conscious self« (ibid.).

Regarding the depiction of madness, video games offer unique opportunities to portray a narrator's mental state because of their medium-specific properties. The video game has been called a »meta-medium« (Domsch 2013, 4) because its technological setup allows for the integration of other media, like »spoken text, written text, [...] sounds and images, both still and moving« (ibid.), without forfeiting their individual features. Hence, when a mad narrator's mind distorts perceptions, this can reach the player on a variety of levels: textual, audial, audio-visual, or (lest we forget a unique quality of video games) interactive. For this purpose, I will start with summarizing ways in which subjectivity can be expressed in video games, followed by an overview of theories of unreliable narration. In order to ascertain how unreliability can serve to negotiate concepts of mental instability, I will then analyze *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team 2016).

2.   Expressions of Subjectivity in Video Games

The conditions of unstable narrating minds reach the player via various subjectivizing techniques. As do literature and film, video games naturally also possess medium-specific means of expressing subjectivity. Their inherent interactivity plays an important role in this regard, which is why Britta Neitzel proposes the distinction between Point of View (PoV) and Point of Action (PoA). The term PoV can be compared to the camera position in films and describes the perspective through which the player perceives her avatar's activities and the game world (Neitzel 2007, 10). PoA, on the other hand, is the player's »manipulative position referring to the actions in a virtual space« (ibid.; my translation from German). Adapting terms from film theory, Neitzel identifies the following varieties of PoV: first, the »objective Point of View,« which never imitates a character's view and can be compared to an omniscient narrator (Neitzel 2007, 15); second, the »semi-subjective Point of View,« which ascribes an avatar the ability to see (Neitzel 2007, 18); third, the »subjective Point of View,« which does not include an avatar, like for example in first-person shooters (Neitzel 2007, 21). The PoV can be compared to Gérard Genette's term of perspective or focalization, i.e., »*who sees?*« (Genette 1980, 186; original emphasis), whereas the PoA correlates with Genette's ›voice,‹ even though the question of »*who speaks?*« (Genette 1980, 186; original emphasis) must be modified to »who acts?« (Neitzel 2007, 14). The PoA can be divided into the following subareas: the (intradiegetic or extradiegetic) position from which the player can act, the area inside the game world from which the player can act

(centered onto a single avatar or decentered), and the mode of execution, meaning whether the player gives direct or indirect orders (Neitzel 2007, 24).

Michael Mosel offers a wide range of narrative subjectivization techniques in video games:[2] He distinguishes between general identifying features of subjectivity such as analepsis with voice-over narration and elliptical storytelling, audio-visual subjectivization techniques, which can also be found in film, and video-game-specific expressions of subjectivity. The audio-visual mode can be generated by »perception shot[s]« which imitate the perception of a character and can be achieved by, for example, depth of field blurs, »predatory vision,« and the distortion of images. Perception shots can also serve gameplay functions as interface elements, like a bloody screen and a loud heartbeat to indicate low health. Audio-visual techniques further include the representation of dreams, nightmares, hallucinations etc., which are often indicated by special colors or motion blur, and perspective take-overs in which a character's view completely ›hijacks‹ what is portrayed on screen. Video-game-specific subjectivization techniques are controlled by the interface. The software and hardware interface elements, including controllers and other input methods which enhance the player's immersion in the fictional world, contribute to the representation of subjectivity. This can, for example, be achieved through virtual reality headsets or haptic feedback from the controller to simulate vibrations in the diegesis. All of the above-mentioned techniques of highlighting subjective filtering processes can also serve to draw attention to a narration's unreliability. An overview of different theories of unreliable narration will be given in the following.

3.   Theories of Unreliable Narration

Even though unreliable narration has been discussed in relation to various media, in particular literature and film, the same level of attention has unfortunately not been applied to video games as of yet. I would argue that this is due to the multimodality of the medium: An unlimited number of individual (micro-)narratives can be embedded in the game world, and these may take the form of every medium which can be represented digitally. Every single one of these embedded narratives can be narrated unreliably on its own or appear untrustworthy in comparison to others. In other words, it can be argued that every element contributing to the narration of a game (e.g., verbal or pictorial ones) can be a source of unreliabil-

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2 The following is a condensed compilation of Mosel's remarks on subjectivization techniques in video games (Mosel 2011, 81-121). For clarity's sake, I have abstained from furnishing every individual piece of information with a bibliographical reference and have quoted the entire passage instead.

ity. This fact allows for harnessing theories of literary or filmic unreliability when discussing unreliable video game narration. However, one must not leave out of consideration that video *games* are not simply made up of verbal and visual signs, to borrow semiotic terminology, but always contain ludic elements. This raises the question of whether there is such a thing as ›ludic unreliability.‹ As I will discuss more elaborately in the analysis of *Dear Esther* and *Layers of Fear,* I am of the opinion that gameplay features, haptic feedback, the interaction between the player and the game, as well as the variability of narratives in an interactive medium can indeed contribute to the unreliability of narrations. In order to be able to explain how ludic unreliability relates to textual and visual parts of the games discussed, I will detail existing research on filmic and literary unreliability in the following.

The academic perception of unreliable narration oscillates between the optimistic view of being able to offer an exhaustive range of definitions and the stance that, after decades of research, most definitions are »circular[,] [...] saying in different words that an unreliable narrator is a narrator who is unreliable« (Sternberg and Yacobi 2016, 330). Theorists of unreliable narration form two distinct groups, namely those advocating a rhetorical approach, who »treat [...] unreliability as a textual property encoded by the implied author for the implied reader to decode« (Shen 2013), and those supporting »a constructivist/cognitivist approach [...] [which] focuses on the interpretive process and regards unreliability as being dependent on actual readers' divergent readings for its very existence« (Shen 2013).

Within the realm of rhetorical approaches, Wayne C. Booth's canonical definition establishes unreliable narration as essentially a matter of irony or discrepant awareness, since it requires »a secret communion of the author and the reader behind the narrator's back« (Booth 1961, 300). Booth goes on to call »a narrator *reliable* when he [or she] speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he [or she] does not« (Booth 1961, 159; original emphasis). However, the notion of an implied author and her values must be met with a critical attitude because, in Booth's conception, the unreliable narrator's stance is always a »*non-conformist attitude*, a dissident disposition, [...] the Other *per se*« (Bode 2011, 210; original emphasis) – and critics must hence be careful not to be mousetrapped by the »ideological baggage« (ibid.) of Booth's agenda. Booth's evaluation of a narrator's (un)reliability originates from the ›center‹ of a construction of normality, so to speak, and judges deviating stances, like that of the mentally unstable narrator, accordingly. Narrators are de-evaluated on the basis of extratextual cultural knowledge, and one must therefore bear in mind that it is a fallacy of criticism to measure textual entities (like the narrator) with a yardstick originating in extratextual ideologies (like normative and marginalizing notions of sanity).

Many scholars have developed their theories on Booth's groundwork. Greta Olson, for example, draws on Booth's model and argues that he »envisages dif-

ferent types of unreliability« (Olson 2003, 96), namely a narrator who »cannot be trusted on a personal level« (ibid.) and one who »makes mistakes about how she perceives herself or her fictional world« (ibid.). Accordingly, Olson distinguishes between untrustworthy and fallible narrators with the latter's unreliability being »*situationally motivated*« (Olson 2003, 102; original emphasis), whereas »untrustworthy narrators strike us as being *dispositionally* unreliable« (Olson 2003, 102; original emphasis), meaning they conceal certain things because of their personality or selfishness (ibid.). This distinction contextualizes madness as situational fallibility. Mad narrators or focalizers are not prone to lie or conceal information deliberately but may report their surroundings as they appear to them. They may simply be a fallible source of information because their eyes cannot be trusted. This form of unreliability can only be exposed through the use of multiperspectivity or with similar methods like internal contradiction because it is not enough to use extratextual knowledge to judge a narrator's or focalizer's view as insane – it might just be how the diegesis works.

Rhetorical approaches to unreliable narration perceive it as being constructed by the implied author; while the reader has to attempt to decode it ›behind the narrator's back,‹ constructivist approaches focus on the cognitive mechanisms and strategies in readers' minds when they detect incongruities. The Constructivist Turn in the study of unreliable narration was »pioneered« (Shen 2013) by Tamar Yacobi, who states that »the judgement of a narration as unreliable – or otherwise – is always an interpretative, hypothetical move« (Yacobi 2001, 224). When readers come across »textual tensions[,] […] referential difficulties, incongruities or (self-)contradictions […], the reader has at […] [her] disposal a wide variety of reconciling and integrating measures«[3] (Yacobi 1981, 113-114). She names five mechanisms which are of great importance for the explanation of how readers deal with difficulties: the genetic principle, the generic principle, the existential principle, the functional principle,[4] and the perspectival principle, the latter being of most importance here because it relates oddities, »in whole or in part, to the peculiarities and circumstances of the observer through whom the world is taken

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3 Yacobi draws on Meir Sternberg's theory of integration in which the notion is defined as follows: »*Integration*, as the overall quest for coherence, driven by our rage for order, includes a variety of patterning and sense-making mechanisms common to all discourse, along with type-specific devices like enchainment in narrative or entailment in logic.« (Sternberg 2012, 412; original emphasis)

4 The genetic principle explains inconsistencies with the text's genesis in a personal and historical situation (Yacobi 1981, 114), the generic principle resolves oddities by ascribing them to the text's genre or style (Sternberg and Yacobi 2016, 405), the existential principle explains incongruities the reader comes across by relating them to »some referential feature or law[,] […] into an integral or even natural part of the fictive reality« (Yacobi 1981, 117), and the functional principle ascribes incongruities or anomalies to the text's structural features (ibid.).

to be refracted« (Yacobi 1981, 118). The observer, who »narrates, experiences, evaluates [...] the represented world« (ibid.), is then categorized as being unreliable.

Yacobi's definition of unreliability, namely the ascription of anomalies to the mediator, is a paradigm shift in the study of unreliable narration. Since it does not axiomatically rest upon notions of ›morals,‹ ›decency,‹ ›normalcy,‹ or other elusive concepts like these, Yacobi's theory considers how individual readers detect narrative unreliability differently and therefore react accordingly. However, it also rates all integrating mechanisms equally and, according to Shen, this is regarded with skepticism by many cognitive narratologists (Shen 2013). Instead, they act on the assumption that readers fall into categories based on, for example, their »narrative competence« (Prince 2003, 61-62) and shared »stereotypic assumptions, frames, scripts, schemata, or mental models in comprehending narrative« (Shen 2013).

When it comes to filmic unreliability, the discussion is as wide-ranging. Seymour Chatman's theory, for instance, hinges on the notion of implied cinematic authorship (Chatman 1990, 130). He deals with the possibility of images contradicting the story told by a character-narrator in voice-over, a »kind of partial unreliability [...] unique to two-track media such as the cinema« (Chatman 1990, 135-136). Chatman's concept, which embraces Booth's ironic unreliability and the implied author's norms, hinges on the necessity for a narrator's discernible personality (Chatman 1990, 136) and excludes the »omission of crucial data in the unraveling of a story« (Chatman 1990, 225). Furthermore, Chatman strives to make for clarity regarding a technique often associated with unreliable narration, namely that of ›point of view.‹ He argues that there are »two loci of ›point of view‹ [...] [,] that of the narrator, and that of the character« (Chatman 1990, 143), which must not be confused. The former, which Chatman christens »slant« (ibid.), is carried out by the narrator and is hence found exclusively in the realm of discourse (ibid.). »Filter« (Chatman 1990, 144), in contrast, is used to describe the »mediating function of a character's consciousness – perception, cognition, emotion, reverie – as events are experienced from a space within the story world« (ibid.). From this distinction, he then deduces two kinds of unreliability: First, if »the narrator's account of the events [...] seems at odds with what the text implies to be the facts« (Chatman 1990, 149), then this is Boothian ironic unreliability par excellence. In contrast to this, Chatman puts the case when »a character's perceptions and conceptions of the story events [...] seem at odds with what the narrator is telling or showing« (ibid.). This is not unreliable narration in Chatman's view but rather »fallible filtration« (ibid.). Since a character is not conscious about the narration, she can therefore not »misrepresent [the story] [...], because she is not attempting to represent it« (Chatman 1990, 150).

Volker Ferenz also advocates curtailing an inflationary use of the term *unreliable narration*. He insists upon calling only the »pseudo-diegetic character narra-

tor, that is, the character-narrator who ›takes over,‹ and thus appears to be in the driving seat of, the narration« (Ferenz 2005, 135), unreliable in a narratological sense because only this type of narrator serves as a »clearly identifiable fictional scapegoat with sufficient ›authority‹ over the narrative as a whole« (ibid.). This is also used as an argument against the unreliability of the theoretical construct of the cinematic narrator (Ferenz 2005, 135, 141) – in lieu of carrying out reliability judgement on the cinematic narrator, incongruities are rather resolved using other integration strategies like Tamar Yacobi's (Ferenz 2005, 141). Ferenz moreover rejects calling a heterodiegetic voice-over narrator unreliable because »it never dominates our viewing strategy« (Ferenz 2005, 143) and is not involved in the story (Ferenz 2005, 144). According to Ferenz, homodiegetic narrators are also not capable of ›proper‹ unreliability because the »subjectively tainted discourse of the voice-over is undermined by the objective images introduced by the cinematic narrator« (145), and he calls them therefore fallible rather than unreliable (Ferenz 2005, 147). The homodiegetic narrator never determines the narration but is only part of it and is hence incapable of falsely depicting it (Ferenz 2005, 147-148). Following Ferenz, solely the pseudo-diegetic narration can be called unreliable (Ferenz 2005, 149).[5] This effect is achieved by »[t]echniques such as the voice-over, subjective camera, the main character's near omnipresence, the composition of space and screen and also the musical score, [...] [which] contribute to the sense that the film appears to be generated by its protagonist« (Ferenz 2005, 152).

Apart from elaborate taxonomies and definitions, scholars also often provide precise textual signals for and sources of unreliable narration as well as studies of character types. Regarding how distance between the implied author's norms and the narrator's can be signaled, Rimmon-Kenan lists the following possibilities: »when the facts contradict the narrator's views, [...] when the outcome of the action proves the narrator wrong, [...] when the views of other characters consistently clash with the narrator's, [...] and when the narrator's language contains internal contradictions, double-edged images, and the like« (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 101). Wall remarks that an »essential indication« (Wall 1994, 20) that a narrator is unreliable is located in the discourse, in the »verbal habits of the narrator« (ibid.): Unreliable narrators tend to give themselves away on the level of discourse because of their »verbal tics« (Wall 1994, 19) and other mannerisms which can betray their »habitual ways of thinking or of framing thoughts about the world of the story that might indicate biases or predispositions« (ibid.).[6] In terms of the main causes and sources of narrators' unreliability, Chatman argues that it »may stem from cupidity [...], cretinism [...], gullibility [...], psychological and moral obtuse-

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5 Ferenz names *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) and *Spider* (Cronenberg 2002) as examples.

6 Roger Fowler refers to this as a narrator's »mind-style« (Fowler 1977, 76).

ness [...], perplexity and lack of information [...], innocence [...], or a whole host of other causes« (Chatman 1978, 233).

To sum up, a consensus of what exactly constitutes unreliable narration has not yet been achieved. On the one hand, rhetorical approaches make out unreliable narration as a textual effect, which is evoked by, for example, certain markers or multiperspectivity, by paratextual clues, or in connection with extratextual world knowledge, cultural contexts, values, and interpersonal standards of ›normalcy.‹ Cognitive approaches, on the other hand, define narrative unreliability as a feature which readers attribute to narrators (or the act of narration per se) in order to resolve textual tensions and inconsistencies, which cannot be resolved in other ways. After this overview of some of the research concerned with unreliable narration, the following chapter investigates how both *Dear Esther* and *Layers of Fear* put an unstable mind at the center of their narration and how, by forcing the player into this perspective, the very notions of objective reality and normality are put at stake. Then again, how images of madness are used differs greatly between the two games: While *Dear Esther* contains a narrator who loses his sense of reality through grief as well as through physical and emotional trauma, the focalizer of *Layers of Fear* exhibits violent behavior as he relives how he dismembered his wife's dead body after she had committed suicide.

4.   »Always half-imagined«: The Unreliability of *Dear Esther*

Dear Esther (The Chinese Room 2012) was originally released as a free-to-play modification for Valve's first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* (2004) in 2008 and can be seen as one of the first games of the ›walking simulator‹[7] genre. In *Dear Esther*, the player interacts with the game from a first-person perspective, and when she moves the avatar, one narrative fragment out of a pool of four possibilities per trigger spot (36 in total) is provided by a voice-over narrator. The player cannot interact with anything on the lonely island in the Hebrides she finds herself on – there are no other characters to talk to, no items to pick up, no mission goals to achieve, nothing to collect apart from pieces of narration. The fragments are letters addressed to a person named Esther and tell the story of the male epistoler who meanders over the forlorn island in search of meaning, gets lost in his own mind, and descends into madness. The narration does not include any replies and thus provides a monoperspectival account. The speaker reveals that Esther was killed in a car accident by a man named Paul, with whom he sought contact before

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7 This term has been used pejoratively in the past, especially in harmful (chrono)normative discussions of what supposedly is and is not a game. Even so, I employ it in this article because I wholeheartedly agree with Bonnie Ruberg that the word is »ripe for reclamation« (Ruberg 2019, 203).

irrevocably losing himself in the island's grasp. The narrator follows the footsteps of Donnelly, a cartographer who, in his book, also gives an account of a shepherd named Jacobson and a hermit escaping to the solitude of the island. Each play-through ends when the player reaches the aerial at the center of the island and jumps from the tower. During one of four possible final monologues, the avatar's shadow transforms into that of a bird mid-fall and, soaring over the island, the player sees the many letters addressed to Esther as an armada of paper boats in the water.

As mentioned above, the game does not rely on mission objectives or competition to spur the player on. Instead, it is the mystery itself, the absence of coherence and closure, which keeps the player going: In *Dear Esther*, »the story is the challenge« (Holmes 2012, 163). Despite its reduced structure, *Dear Esther*'s narration is unreliable on two levels. The most striking source of unreliability, which is almost traditional, is the exclusively verbal narration in the form of an »epistolary novel« (Unterhuber 2012, 1), whereas the variability and therefore instability of the narrative caused by the gameplay elements similarly contribute to the narration's unreliability (Jacobi 2016, 135).

The ambiguity of the narrator's account is the first hint that the narrator cannot be trusted entirely. In level two, »The Buoy,« the narrator states that he »found what must amount to several tons of gloss paint« and that he intends to use it to »decorate [...] [the] island in the icons and symbols of [...] [his and Esther's] disaster« (The Chinese Room 2012). Concerning the meaning of the symbols, which can be found around the island, the narrator explains that, for example, Paul, the man who killed Esther in the car accident, handed him a mug with chemical diagrams on it when they met. In another narrative fragment, which can be triggered in the same spot, however, the idea to paint these particular signs comes from posters in the hospital waiting room after Esther's death. In the next level, the narrator muses whether he applied the paint or whether Donnelly is responsible:

> Did he paint these stones, or did I? Who left the pots in the hut by the jetty? Who formed the museum under the sea? Who fell silently to his death, into the frozen waters? Who erected this godforsaken aerial in the first place? Did this whole island rise to the surface of my stomach, forcing the gulls to take flight? (The Chinese Room 2012)

In the same chapter, the speaker even hints at the possibility that he made the paint himself from Esther's remains, »[r]educe[d] to ash, mix[ed] with water [...] [to] make a phosphorescent paint for these rocks and ceilings« (The Chinese Room 2012), and this contradicts the statement mentioned above that the narrator found the paint on the island. The fluorescent inscriptions mirror the way the fragments

of *Dear Esther*'s narration are embedded into the island's environment and become triggered by spatial movement within the game world.

Dear Esther's narrator strives to inscribe his life and memories on the island's surface and, as becomes more and more clear as the narration progresses, the border between the narrator and the island becomes blurred and begins to vanish altogether:

> Dear Esther. I have found myself to be as featureless as this ocean, as shallow and unoccupied as this bay, a listless wreck without identification. My rocks are these bones and a careful fence to keep the precipice at bay. (The Chinese Room 2012)
> If only Donnelly had experienced this, he would have realized he was his own shoreline, as am I. Just as I am becoming this island, so he became his syphilis, retreating into the burning synapses, the stones, the infection. (The Chinese Room 2012)
>
> I am traveling through my own body, following the line of infection from the shattered femur toward the heart. (The Chinese Room 2012)

The narrator's diseased body seems to become the island itself, an explorable entity, inscribed with his mental instability. And since it is unclear whether the avatar can be equated with the narrator, or whether we play someone else entirely, a playthrough either represents a journey of the narrator piecing together his own story or one of making sense of his narrative from the outside in. Whether or not the island is ›real‹ in the first place, it becomes a manifestation of the narrator's madness which players can explore. The relationship between the narrator and the island is paralleled by the description of Donnelly who was likewise rendered unreliable by the island. The narrator describes that Donnelly, who was suffering from final-stage syphilis,[8] »is not to be trusted,« »an unreliable witness,« and that his account of the island's geography is »not the text of a stable or trustworthy reporter.« »[I]ncreasingly drawn into [...] [Donnelly's] orbit,« the narrator's descent into madness progresses (The Chinese Room 2012).

Due to the narrator's often contradictory and confused statements, his infected leg injury, his malnutrition, and his suicidal tendencies, the player is compelled to question the narrator's reliability to the point that she must challenge the notion of the island's physical existence. One of the four opening monologues outright proposes the very idea that the island only exists in the narrator's imagination: »Dear Esther. I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude a split opened up and it beached remotely here«

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8 The fact that Donnelly is suffering from a sexually transmitted disease makes his deviant position even clearer.

(The Chinese Room 2012). The narrator insists on the fact that the connections between the island and his traumatic memories cannot be a coincidence and that he is bound to see his trauma in the island's design:

> The mount is clearly the focal point of this landscape; it almost appears so well placed as to be artificial. I find myself easily slipping into the delusional state of ascribing purpose, deliberate motive to everything here. Was this island formed during the moment of impact; when we were torn loose from our moorings and the seatbelts cut motorway lanes into our chests and shoulders, did it first break surface then? (The Chinese Room 2012)

The narrator's grasp of reality fades, and the unreliable verbal narration causes the player to question the veracity of the world on a visual level. That the island is »always half-imagined,« as the narrator asserts, becomes abundantly clear when the player falls into a hole in the ground of the caves and finds herself on an underwater version of the M5, a British motorway between Exeter and Bristol (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: *The underwater motorway in* Dear Esther*'s level »The Caves«*

A similar instance of visual unreliability is the appearance of dark silhouettes around the island. These shadows often only appear in the corner of one's eye and vanish as the player gets too close, and that is why the player sometimes cannot be sure whether she saw a silhouette or was tricked by something else (Ascher 2012, 2). As one of the letter fragments reveals, the narrator makes a similar observation but dismisses it as ›not real‹: »I have become convinced I am not alone here, even though I am equally sure it is simply a delusion brought upon by circumstance« (The Chinese Room 2012). As the narrator falls prey to insanity, the player begins to doubt her own senses as well, which brings another layer of unreliability to the surface.

Dear Esther's narrator provides us with a fragmented narrative which cannot be taken at face value. The game's »rather traditional construction of an unreliable

narrator attempting to piece together a meaningful life-narrative« (Jacobi 2016, 134) is primarily conveyed through verbal code in the form of the letter fragments which can be triggered by movements within the game world. The narrator's account is evidently close to a literary work and, as has been shown, the »discrepancy between the interpretations of the narrator of the situation and our own« (ibid.) stems from a wide range of markers of unreliable narration like »internal contradictions« (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 101) or verbal habits like speaker-orientedness and incomplete or incoherent speech (e.g., Wall 1994, 19-20; Nünning 1999, 65-68). The speaker's fragile state of mind as well as his worsening physical condition also contribute to the fact that one begins to categorize him as a fallible narrator (Olson 2003, 100-102).

However, *Dear Esther* does not only consist of verbal narration; one must not neglect the potential unreliability of visual and ludic elements. In the case of *Dear Esther*, the visual level does not contradict the narrator's words but rather illustrates their unreliability, like, for example, in the underwater level. Apart from the ambiguous, unreliable verbal narration, which is »designed to prohibit any single reading of events« (Pinchbeck 2011, 48), *Dear Esther*'s narration is also unstable because the player can trigger the narrative fragments. Yet, in this game, player agency is an illusion: While players are able to move the avatar to start the letter fragments and may even skip certain optional paths or trigger points, the narrative's progression is predetermined and the selection occurs by chance – »we play the game as if our actions were consequential in constructing a narrative, all the while knowing that our actions have no impact on the narrative in the first place« (Jacobi 2016, 135).[9] The variability of the narration as a whole and the unreliability of the verbal fragments by themselves share a kind of form-content correlation. The letters' literary unreliability is mirrored in the narration's ambiguity and instability. As a result, one is not able to grasp the story's full meaning, and the player fails to construct a coherent narrative – the quest for coherence is doomed to fail. Furthermore, the differences between individual playthroughs make them unreliable in comparison because it is impossible to discern what ›really‹ happened and whether the island is a physically manifest entity.

As has been argued, *Dear Esther*'s narration is unreliable on different levels, making use of verbal, visual, and ludic code. However, as important as these elements are for the game's style, its development of a narrative and the feeling it evokes in the player, the letters read in voice-over narration are the most prominent source of unreliability, whereas this effect is intensified by the visual and ludic

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9   While this idea might not present itself to every player, and some may even try to suspend their disbelief of ›real‹ agency in order to be able to enjoy the interactive narrative, further playthroughs of the approximately one-hour-long game clarify that the player cannot influence which pieces of narration she is confronted with, as they are determined by chance.

elements. Due to the game's variability, different players will most likely have completely different narrative experiences. This is caused by the game mechanics and also by the visual effects – the result is, however, mostly inscribed in the game's verbal narration. The narrator's madness and the resulting unreliability of his narrative are therefore reflected on several levels: the verbal voice-over narration, the visual level, and the alinearity of the narrative due to its interactivity.

5.   Seeing Through the Madman's Eyes: Unreliable Narration in Layers of Fear (Bloober Team 2016)

Layers of Fear is a psychological horror game[10] which was released in 2016 by the Polish developer studio Bloober Team. In the game, the player controls the story's protagonist, a painter, who remains alone in his mansion and struggles to create his magnum opus. As the game progresses, verbal, audial, and visual clues enable the player to reconstruct that the painter is an alcoholic with psychological problems who drove his wife and daughter to leave the house with his aggressive behavior. As his wife was left disfigured after a fire, he took her and their daughter back in to care for them. However, his alcoholism only worsened and, after his wife committed suicide in the bathtub, his daughter was taken by the authorities. Incited by his swiftly advancing descent into madness, the painter apparently took six parts from his wife's body to create his masterpiece. He used her skin as the canvas, her blood and bone marrow as the first layers, her hair and one of her fingers to apply the ›paint,‹ and her eye as the picture's spectator. From a first-person perspective, the player controls the painter through his distorted memories of retrieving the parts.

The game features three different endings which are triggered by the player's actions. In the ›neutral‹ ending, the painter's endeavors seem to succeed. Yet, the immaculate picture of his wife becomes a distorted and mutilated figure as he admires it. Disposing of the failed attempt in a room filled with identical paintings, it is revealed that they are only marred in the painter's eye. Devastated at the sight of the monstrous figures laughing at him, he begins painting anew. The ›bad‹ ending shows the same process, only that this time the painting also includes his daughter. Realizing how horribly he acted, and that making amends is impossible, the painter sets fire to his paintings and perishes in the flames. In the ›good‹

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10   The genre term *psychological horror* originally refers to filmmaker Val Lewton's horror film cycle (1942-1946) and describes films which »present strange, bizarre or puzzling events without accounting for them rationally, or indicating that they are obvious products of the supernatural« (Strinati 2000, 90). Hence, they play with the notion that the images of a horror film might be excrescences of the protagonist's imagination (ibid.).

ending, the painter creates a self-portrait which he deems pleasing at last. The last part of the cutscene shows the painter's work in an exhibition alongside other famous artists.

Six months after the game's release, *Layers of Fear* was furnished with a DLC. In *Layers of Fear: Inheritance* (Bloober Team 2016), the player returns to the painter's mansion as his adult daughter who is struggling with her trauma and thus seeks closure and answers as to what happened to her father's state of mind. Even though it is not part of the main game, *Layers of Fear: Inheritance* will also be used in the following analysis because the multiperspectivity it implies brings a new element to how *Layers of Fear* posits its narration's unreliability. As a first step toward circumstantiating how the game is narrated unreliably, I will illustrate how *Layers of Fear* establishes the subjectivity of the perspective from which the events are portrayed.

Applying Neitzel's terms *PoA* and *PoV*, *Layers of Fear* depicts the environment through a subjective point of view because its first-person perspective presents everything the players sees through the painter's eyes. This is established with the employment of a number of video-game-specific techniques to betray subjectivity as well as general, audio-visual ones; several collectible text fragments, for instance, reveal that the protagonist wears a wooden leg prosthesis which causes him to limp. During the game, the fact that the perspective is the artist's becomes noticeable audio-visually, when moving the character, in the rhythmic swaying of the camera to one side and the tapping sound of wood colliding with wood. The fact that the camera is not even static when the player does not move the protagonist, in addition to the large quantity of empty wine bottles in the house, indicates that the painter is drunk at the moment of playing and is, most likely, suffering from alcoholism. However, the painter's limp, for example, also makes itself felt as a gameplay element: The character not only walks more slowly and less straight than players of other first-person video games are accustomed to, it also takes a split second longer until the player's command to start moving is translated to the protagonist, thus emphasizing his sluggish movements. The protagonist's deviant physical and mental state are therefore indicated by several gameplay markers. *Layers of Fear*'s PoA, which is, to recapitulate, defined as the player's »manipulative position referring to the actions in the virtual space« (Neitzel, 2007, 10; translation from German by Sarah Beyvers), also ranks among the elements contributing to how the game establishes subjectivity: The player can only act through the painter and give direct orders. *Layers of Fear* does not show the painter's hands; a ›hand symbol,‹ which is displayed to indicate that the player can interact with the item in question, however, foregrounds that what she sees as well as what she can manipulate reaches the player exclusively through the protagonist's perspective. This is taken even further by the fact that, in order to open doors or drawers, the player cannot simply push a button. Instead, she has to drag the cursor in the

corresponding direction. The isomorphism of the painter's and the player's movements thus puts the player literally in the shoes of the protagonist and highlights the fact that she is at the mercy of his subjective narration.

Following Mosel's list of how video games can betray subjectivized perspectives by means of game-specific and general techniques, the latter of which can also be found in film, it becomes clear that *Layers of Fear*'s first-person perspective serves the purpose of both: As a gameplay element, it centers the player's actions around one character. *Layers of Fear* features only one loading screen, namely in the beginning before the game even starts and does not include any cutscenes which break away from the painter's perspective, which has an audio-visual effect closely resembling filmic techniques. It evokes a feeling of continuity and consistency – one reviewer even compares its impact to that of Alejandro Iñárritu's 2014 film *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (Monroe 2016) – and draws attention to the situation that, in a continuous perception shot, every fragment of visual and audial information seems to reach the player through the protagonist's sensory filters.

After having explained how *Layers of Fear* establishes the subjectivity of its perspective, the following deals with how the effect of unreliability is generated in the computer game's narrative. First, it posits the protagonist's unstable state of mind through visual and verbal code alike. In addition to his aforementioned drinking problem, which becomes manifest in the omnipresence of empty wine bottles and the protagonist's swaying gaze, one of the first clues toward the artist's deteriorating state of mind can be found in his study. On his desk, the player encounters a set of gruesome illustrations for a children's book containing the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*. As a letter next to the drawings reveals, they are part of one of the final jobs the failed artist took before locking himself away completely in his house. Liam Brickstone, a friend of the painter's and the publisher who provided this assignment, expresses his disappointment and shock in the face of the drawings' brutality in the letter and asks whether the painter, if he expects him to print these illustrations, this »demented nightmare fuel,« has »completely lost [his] […] God damn [sic!] mind« (Bloober Team 2016).

Furthermore, the artist appears to have prolonged hallucinations of rats in the mansion. After the first door the player can open, she is able to find a letter sent by a pest exterminator company stating the following:

> We would like to ask you to cease bothering our pest control specialists, as well as refrain from sending any more of your highly inappropriate letters (I'll have you know that my mother is a respectable woman and does not take kindly to such accusations). All of our employees that visited your house reported absolutely no signs of a rodent infestation of any kind, and as such decided not to act further

than a prophylactic spraying. Please treat this letter as a final warning or else the next envelope you'll receive will be from our lawyers. (Bloober Team 2016)

Even though this letter unobjectionably denies the existence of a rat infestation in the house, the player can observe – through the artist's eyes, that is – how rats suddenly emerge in several rooms and vanish without a trace. Additionally, one can find hundreds of empty mousetraps, and 16 collectible drawings reveal that the protagonist sees, hears, and feels the presence of rats under the floorboards, in the pipes, and even in his wooden leg, under his skin, and in his hair.

The painter's obsession with these imaginary rats even goes so far that he presumably paints what he sees in Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* (1489-90) (see fig. 2): a horribly distorted figure that both resembles a rat and carries one.[11] This again foregrounds the fact that the painter's perspective is unreliable. This effect is achieved by providing insight into the distortion of the artist's mind and, in the process, exposing them as such by framing them with a distinct referent, an anchor in (extratextual and intratextual) ›reality,‹ namely da Vinci's work.

Fig. 2: Leonardo da Vinci's painting through the protagonist's gaze

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11 Apart from the rather obvious visual similarities between the two paintings, the connection can also be established with the help of paratextual information from one of the game's trailers. In the teaser, da Vinci's work gradually fades away and becomes *Layers of Fear*'s protagonist's painting of the abominable, rat-like figure. This is commented on by the painter in voice-over narration: »Many believe the ermine implies purity, moderation – but it is almost alien in appearance. Blackish, rat-like rabbit … Abhorrent. It complements the darkness of the woman's hollowed eyes, dark paint like blood mixed with charcoal, drowning and suffocating. The ugliness beneath the surface is seething, ready to burst like a reeking boil. Do you see it now? Do you see it like I do?« (Bloober Team 2015)

In summary, *Layers of Fear* exclusively ascribes the painter the ability to see and simultaneously establishes that his eyes are not to be trusted because he seems to have lost his grip on reality and on his own sanity. Harking back to the discussions surrounding unreliable narration in film, it is possible to argue that, in *Layers of Fear*, the painter serves as a »pseudo-diegetic character narrator« (Ferenz 2005, 135) because he seems to be in charge of the narration – as argued before, he is staged to be the filter through which information reaches the player. Following Chatman's distinction of narrator perspective, slant, and a character perspective, filter, *Layers of Fear* only exhibits a case of »fallible filtration« (Chatman 1990, 149) because a character's consciousness seems to serve as an unreliable mediator whose perceptions' lack in veracity is supposed to be exposed by comparing them to the yardstick of »what the narrator is telling or showing« (ibid.). However, since the video game truly only provides information through the protagonist's mind, this assessment proves to be problematic. A narrator's intervention in exposing the main character's fallible filtration can, if at all possible, only be identified in the fact that the painter's hallucinations are framed by episodes which appear to depict ›reality‹ in the widest sense.

Themes like madness, visual art, and the changing of pictures are brought to the player's attention from the very beginning, when a quote from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) appears after the loading screen: »every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter« (Wilde 1993, 4). Additionally, one of the first bookshelves the player encounters contains a book, which can also be inspected more closely, named *True Story behind* The Picture of Dorian Gray: *Was it true all along?* This shifts the player's focus to the countless pictures in the house, which are, without exception, famous artists' real works, like, for instance, Augustus Egg's *Past and Present: No. 1 – Misfortune* (1858), Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's *The Abduction of Ganymede* (1635), and Lavinia Fontana's *Portrait Of Antonietta Gonzalez* (1595). At first, the player can explore the Victorian mansion freely, which is, albeit dark, both tidy and clean. This first frame of ›normality‹ and order is breached when the player, after collecting the key from the study upstairs, enters the painter's studio on the ground floor. The room is destroyed, chaotic, and bespattered with paint all over, and one might argue that it figuratively serves as the first glimpse into the protagonist's unstable state of mind. As the player leaves the room, painted writing above the door frame exhorts to »get it right this time.« However, upon exiting the studio, one realizes that the corridor the player finds herself in is not the one she passed before entering the room. This situation is the starting signal for the journey through the painter's gradually worsening hallucinations which take the following forms: First, the building's architecture ceases making sense. Upon several instances, the player may go in circles and re-enter the very same room over and over, even though she opens different doors, or she may find doors appearing behind her back, being

suddenly bricked up or may find them completely filled with burned books. The lift which goes up several floors in a two-story house also contributes to the fact that the player not only loses her location in the house, but also loses all sense of space. The »nightmarish architectural impossibilities« (Smith 2016), as one reviewer calls them, culminate in completely nonsensical architecture.

Yet, the painter's hallucinations do not only affect the architecture. The non-static game environment is also reflected in the alteration of the paintings in the mansion. Upon approaching the works, some of them appear like double-exposed photographs, while the paint melts from others and drips onto the floor. During episodes of the painter's hallucinations, they are repeatedly penetrated by glimpses of ›normality‹: Whereas the room in figure 3 is on its head as the player enters, a split-second image shows what it is supposed to look like without the painter's unreliable filter (see fig. 4). However, since the room cannot be entered during the first playscene, which presumably strives to show the mansion before the painter loses his mind completely, this statement cannot be made without any doubts because referring to these instances as ›reality‹ means bringing extratextual knowledge to the table – the player will categorize the room in figure 4 as ›real‹ because it does not defy the laws of gravity.

Fig. 3 and 4: A room appearing on its head as the player enters, and the ›normal‹ version of the same room

In addition to the plausible depiction of the house in the beginning and the resurfacing instances of normality, the player is also able to walk around the entire mansion after she completes the ›neutral‹ ending. This playscene is constructed like a piece of the paratext, like a walk-in display of end titles: The player not only finds a credit book with drawings of the video game's creators, but the scene also appears to offer a chance to observe the surroundings ›objectively,‹ without the painter's distorting gaze – it shows that the house is indeed neglected and chaotic, but seems to expose all visual and architectural impossibilities as figments of the protagonist's imagination. This argument is also supported by the fact that, after the cutscene during which the artist disposes of the failed painting in a room full of others, the player can enter said room and find that the works are flawless. Yet,

as the continuing swaying motion of the camera and the limp reveal, the player still controls the painter and, upon entering the studio and pulling the linen from the canvas, he begins painting anew. Hence, the player neither sees through an objective perspective, nor must the scene be seen as being completely located in the paratext. The circularity of *Layers of Fear*, i.e., the reappearance of the studio as a starting point as well as the act of painting as an interlinking element between beginning and ›end‹ of the narrative, emphasizes the inescapability of the painter's mind, and thus the impossibility of not being affected by his madness.

The DLC *Layers of Fear: Inheritance*, however, consolidates the assumption that the painter's hallucinations are framed and breached, and therefore exposed, by images of ›reality.‹ The artist's fallible filtration is also laid open when his adult daughter returns to his abandoned mansion and offers another account of what is ›real.‹ What she sees is congruent with the destroyed, yet plausible, version of the house which the player can examine after the main game. The DLC is, however, structured like *Layers of Fear*, and the artist's daughter therefore soon proves to be unreliable as well as she seeks to make sense of her childhood memories.

In summary, the unreliable narration of *Layers of Fear* operates on several levels. First, the game constantly and almost aggressively reminds the player that what she sees has been filtered through the painter's mind by means of gameplay and visual cues. Second, it constructs the artist as an unreliable witness by emphasizing his mental lability. Third, the video game portrays a visually unstable game environment and nonsensical architecture which is, additionally, framed by images exposing the painter's hallucinations. In *Layers of Fear*, the player is forced into the protagonist's perspective and therefore shares his othered stance, as the painter's mental and physical illnesses take center stage. This encourages calling, for example, notions of universal normalcy into question because the player cannot help but see through the painter's eyes.

Layers of Fear's imitation of a late Victorian setting and its aforementioned invocation of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* spotlights the context of the role of madness toward the end of the nineteenth century. Victorian and fin-de-siècle preoccupation with the mind is notorious, as can be exemplified by prose texts like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as well as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or the genre of the dramatic monologue in poetry which can offer deepest insights into a madman's mind (Pedlar 2006, 20). Discussions of the duality of human nature, of evil and madness within, took center stage in the nineteenth century because, as the narrator of the mid-Victorian sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) asks, »Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?« (Braddon 2012, 344) Seeing *Layers of Fear* in this context, one can infer that the game's depiction of madness does not so much allude to extratextual discourses of mental illness, but that it refers back to fictionalizations of mental instability which were in vogue toward the end of the nineteenth century. This

metafictional aspect may be read as a way of highlighting the game's disconnectedness from psychiatric contexts – that is, the fact that it does not strive to depict illnesses mimetically but that it comments on their fictionalization.

However, one should not neglect the problematic fact that the image of alcoholism, psychosis, and depression the narrative constructs suggests that the protagonist's desecrating acts are a direct result of his mental state, offering a rather reductive, clichéd, and harmful concept of mental instability. One can even find a checklist of »[w]arning signs [...] of schizophrenia« in the house, which contains handwritten comments like »YES,« »ALWAYS HAD THAT,« or »HAVEN'T NOTICED« (Bloober Team 2016), presumably written by the artist's wife since the handwriting resembles that of a note left on the studio door by her. This precise nomination of a particular mental illness must be seen as contrasting with the game's aforementioned possible comments on the fictionalization of madness.

6.   Conclusion

Both *Dear Esther* and *Layers of Fear* feature a protagonist descending into madness who serves as focalizer or narrator. The instabilities of verbal accounts, visual representations, and spatial situatedness lead the player to doubt not only the reliability of the respective filter but to mistrust her own senses.

In *Dear Esther*, there is a narrator in the more traditional sense of the word, since he tells his story in voice-over narration. However, his state of mind is also mirrored in the visual manifestations of his unreliability – we can never be quite sure whether the island exists in the first place –, and the myriad of possible narrations also show the narrative instability on a ludic level. Yet, it is never revealed whether the player controls the narrator or whether she is simply following in his footsteps. Whichever the case may be, however, the effect stays the same: The quest for narrative coherence, for meaning and closure, for order in the chaos of the mind, is doomed to fail. The player remains powerless because the course of the narration is widely determined by chance, and the ambiguity of the narrative can never be shrugged off.

In *Layers of Fear*, the story is quite unequivocally told through the painter's perspective. *Layers of Fear*'s main protagonist completely ›takes over‹ what is shown on screen, and players of the horror game are thus completely at the mercy of his perceptions. The distorted images can be ascribed to the fallible filtration processes of his mind and the painter's hallucinations are exposed as such on two levels: On the one hand, he is characterized as mentally unstable and prone to delusions by textual and visual information the player can collect. On the other hand, the painter's gaze is debunked as unreliable by the incorporation of instances wherein ›reality‹ seems to bleed into his version of the world.

Even though both games put madness and unreliability at the center of their narration, different causes and effects of mental instability are negotiated. While *Dear Esther*'s protagonist is affected by grief after Esther's death to the point that his grasp on reality loosens, and his emotional pain, his ailing body, and the island blend into one another, the painter in *Layers of Fear* relives (or acts out) his trauma. His behavior is driven by grief and loss, and his state is aggravated by alcoholism. Both games, as well as their mad narrators and focalizers, offer insight into mental processes, and their fragmented narration calls the very notion of an objectively discernible ›reality‹ into question. By confronting the player with ambiguous narratives, these video games negotiate the primal fear of failing to construct meaning, of being lost to madness, the menace lurking within all of us. However, *Dear Esther* and *Layers of Fear* do not simply offer a way of localizing and domesticating the fear of (mental) illness (Gilman 1988, 1) as »solid, fixed images that remain constantly external to our sense of self« (Gilman 1988, 2). As examples of the interactive medium video game, they provide, by definition, a chance of truly putting the player in the madwoman's or madman's shoes. As Valerie Pedlar summarizes, madness can be seen as a »revelation of fears and desires, of alternative ways of seeing the world and its inhabitants, and of the irrational processes of the unconscious – and as leading to further understanding of the human condition« (2006, 23). Playing madness thus becomes a way of seeing the world through othered and marginalized eyes, which might just be the place to challenge the dichotomies of categories like ›normal‹ and ›abnormal,‹ ›healthy‹ and ›insane.‹

Ludography

DEAR ESTHER (The Chinese Room 2016, The Chinese Room)
LAYERS OF FEAR (Aspyr Media 2016, Bloober Team)
LAYERS OF FEAR: INHERITANCE (Aspyr Media 2016, Bloober Team)

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