

Dear Esther isn't a story about you. You don't stem a tide of Islamic extremism with a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle, you don't save the Milky Way from a Reaper invasion, and you don't stomp a bunch of Goombas on your way to save the princess. Dear Esther is a mystery. It's a ghost story. It's a historical document you unearth. It's a first-person explorer, as opposed to first-person shooter, set on a Myst-like island where one narrator's downward spiral is revealed in puzzling vignettes, rather than revealed by puzzling your way around levers and sliding boxes.

At its root, Dear Esther is also a Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus story, which is a story of transformation in the Bible. Dear Esther wrestles with God and theology using poetic prose and a scientific bent to its imagery. With dark undercurrents, Dear Esther and the Bible run parallels in both covert and overt ways.

My first clue was the title. Dear "Esther"? It's not typical for a video game in a contemporary setting to incorporate a woman's name whose popularity peaked in 1890. The game wasn't Dear Jessica, or Dear Ashley, or Dear Brittany, or any other currently common female name. It's Esther. And Esther isn't just an old name, it's an ancient one.

I vaguely remembered a book called Esther in the Bible. I grabbed the New King James Version sitting on a low shelf in my living room and flipped to the Old Testament. There she was. The Book of Esther.



Turns out the Esther of the Bible was a hottie -- smoking hot, actually -- and she saved the Jews in 5th century B.C. from genocide. If you doubt the feasibility of this scenario, that a woman's standout beauty and demeanor could stop a holocaust, then please refer to photos of Natalie Portman, Mila Kunis, or Scarlett Johansson for a few examples of beautiful Jewish women. Placed in that context, it started making sense to me how Esther could save an entire people from a proto-Hitler plan.

Esther's name means "star" in Persian. In *Dear Esther*, the story begins with you staring at a distant radio tower, its single light slowly blinking at the top of a steel lattice mast. Before you even hear the first ghostly radio transmissions, you know you have to reach that beacon. Its pulsing red

light is your guiding star. It's your Esther.

The rest of Dear Esther isn't so much about saving a particular people as it is about broadcasting a warning to *all* people: stay away. Don't come to this Hebridean Isle. Because you will find a cautionary tale involving automobile brake circuitry, alcohol chemical formulas, and a breadcrumb trail of candles leading you from exhibit to exhibit through a museum of melancholy, turning you into a one-man vigil. This is a lonely island, and woven into the loneliness, liquor, and scattered car parts is another story from the Bible. This story is less subtle, however, and is drawn with luminous paint inside the island's caverns and on its cliff walls. It's the aforementioned story of Paul on the road to Damascus.



In Dear Esther, the unseen narrator is wracked with grief about a car accident he was involved in. The narrator's road was the M5 motorway, a stretch of English highway that runs about 150 miles from West Bromwich to Exeter. Incidentally, the travel distance between Jerusalem and Damascus -- Paul's route -- was also about 150 miles.

Paul (whose name was Saul at the time) was on the way to Damascus to capture and imprison Christians. Just before he reached Damascus, a

bright light knocked him off his horse. This vision of Jesus Christ, this bright light, left him blind for three days. Saul took on a name change and was baptized: Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle. He could also see again, so that was nice. Paul's life truly began and carried forward from that moment.

Dear Esther's narrator probably saw bright lights, too, but they were the headlights of oncoming traffic. A combination of drinking and driving negatively contributed to that "vision." He was blinded -- or at least peering through a hazy veil of hospital inpatient drugs -- while he watched his loved one, Esther, die. Unlike Paul, the narrator's life truly ends and never moves past that moment.



In other words, Paul's conversion came about because of who he met on that road: Jesus. While the narrator's conversion came about because of who he lost on that road: Esther. Once that idea struck me, the baritone notes undercutting the violent sea winds unsettled me even more.

As I encountered display after display unveiling the story, I realized that the entire island was an epistle, an open letter written for those that come to the island. You follow in the narrator's footsteps, only to be warned not to follow in them. By then it's too late. His loss becomes your loss. His

addictions are your own. By the time you reach your final destination, the biggest puzzle will be to figure out whether you are you, or if you have been the narrator this entire time.

The island is fixed in a deeper reality than Red Dead Redemption's New Austin, and crafted more meaningfully than Skyrim. From cathedral-like caverns stuffed with stalagmites and stalactites, to the hardscrabble brush clinging to existence along the steep cliffs, Dear Esther is a beautiful and broken ghost world. While Paul made it to Damascus, Dear Esther's narrator never does, and is instead bound to seek redeeming grace while walking the island forever, stopping at each candlelit shrine like they're prayers beads on a rosary.