

The Art of Dear Esther:

Building an Environment to tell a Story

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2012

Introduction

- Started out as a Mod in 2008
- Was originally a research project



Introduction

- Was a cult success in the modding scene
- But not fulfilling its true potential

The screenshot shows the Desura website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for 'chineserom', '6 updates', '14 updates', '0 threads', and 'logout'. A search bar is also present. Below this is a category menu with tabs for 'HOME', 'iPhone', 'X360', 'Wii', 'PS3', 'PSP', 'DS', and '>>'. A secondary menu lists 'games', 'mods', 'addons', 'downloads', 'videos', 'news', 'tutorials', 'engines', 'developers', 'groups', 'forums', 'store', and 'jobs!'. The main content area features a large banner for 'Dear Esther', a Half-Life 2 mod released on Feb 15, 2011. Below the banner are tabs for 'summary', 'news', 'reviews', 'features', 'tutorials', 'downloads', 'videos', 'images', 'forum', 'stats', and 'desura'. A paragraph describes the game as an award-winning, critically acclaimed, experimental first-person game built in the Source engine. Below this is a Desura banner with the text 'INSTALL DEAR ESTHER USING DESURA THE EASIEST WAY TO PLAY' and an 'INSTALL NOW' button. The bottom section includes 'Latest Screens' with three game images, 'Latest News: Original Dear Esther out now on Desura' with a comment count of 15, and a 'Profile' sidebar on the right showing user information for 'chineserom'.

chineserom | 6 updates | 14 updates | 0 threads | logout | Search

HOME iPhone X360 Wii PS3 PSP DS >>

games mods addons downloads videos news tutorials engines developers groups forums store jobs!

Dear Esther

Half-Life 2 mod | Released Feb 15, 2011

summary news reviews features tutorials downloads videos images forum stats desura

Dear Esther is an award-winning, critically acclaimed, experimental first-person game. Built in the Source engine, it abandons traditional gameplay, leaving only a rich world soaked in atmosphere, and an abstract, poetic story to explore. Dear Esther was originally launched in 2008 and is currently being rebuilt by Robert Briscoe - watch this space for updates.

DESURA

INSTALL DEAR ESTHER USING DESURA
THE EASIEST WAY TO PLAY

INSTALL NOW

Latest Screens

Profile

Update Edit Profile

Icon

Platform Windows

Game Half-Life 2

Developed By chineserom

Contact Send Message

Official Page Thechineserom.co.uk

Release Date Released Feb 15, 2011

Mod Watch Track this mod

Share

Latest News: Original Dear Esther out now on Desura

15 comments by Henlex on Feb 17th, 2011

A deserted island... a lost man... memories of a fatal crash... a book written by a dying explorer.

Dear Esther is a ghost story told using first-person gaming technologies. Rather than traditional gameplay

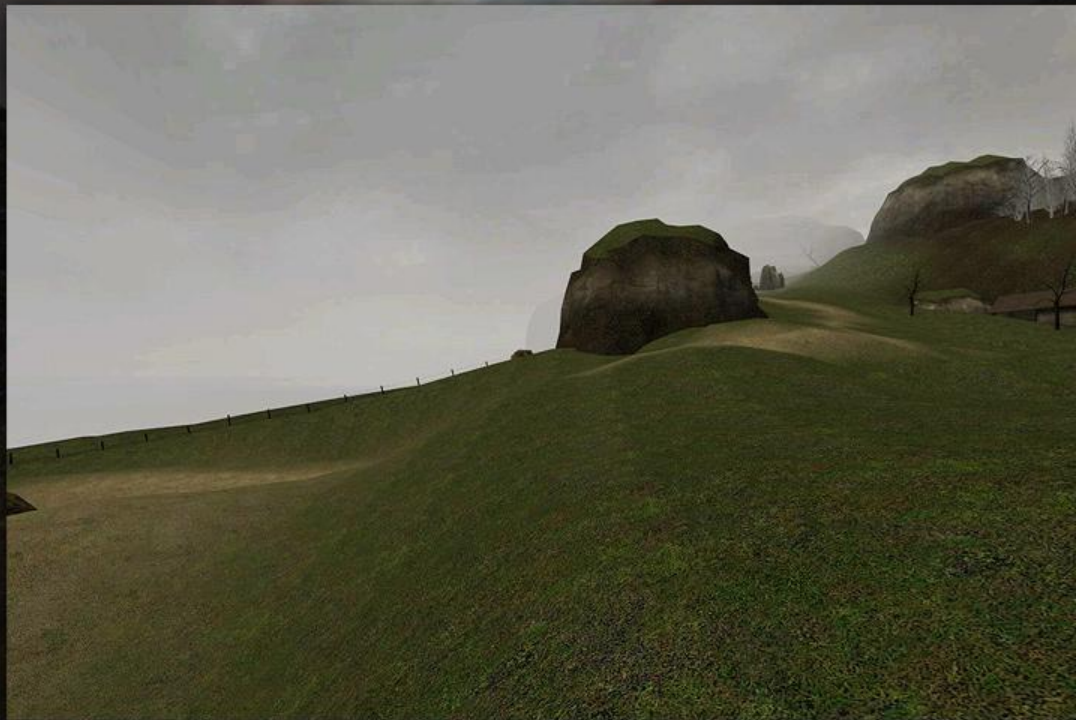
Strengths

- Engaging voice-over narrative
- Rich detailed history and story



Weaknesses

- Visual detail inconsistent with narrative detail
- 'disconnection' between audio and visual experience



The Concept

- Reconnect the story to the visuals
- Use the environment as an immersion tank



Realism **VS** Immersion



source

sod off with all them bloody normal maps!™



Early Art Test:

- Looked flat and unconvincing
- Realism not happening



Impressionistic

- Mix of the real and surreal
- Detail and perceived detail
- Mirrors the story's ambiguous nature



Impressionistic

- Atmospheric
- Mysterious
- **Immersive!**



Impressionistic Qualities:

- A strong sense of light, atmosphere
- Evoking emotion over reality
- Constrained colour palette



- **Test 2:** Softer, muted lighting, colours and textures



- More Creative Freedom





Realism isn't the Holy Grail for Immersion

- It's not the fidelity of the content that matters, but the message and experience you portray through that content



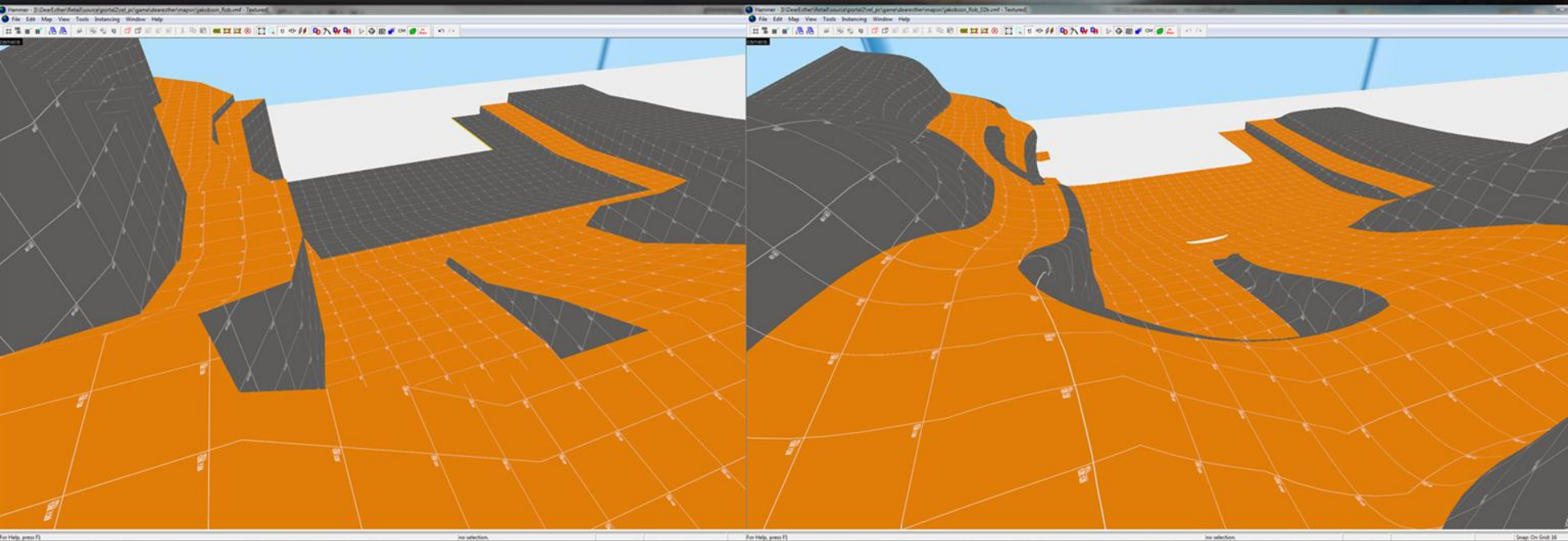
The Importance of Detail: Connecting the story to the world

Example Scene

- Missing important narrative details
- Has huge potential to add to the story



Setting the Stage

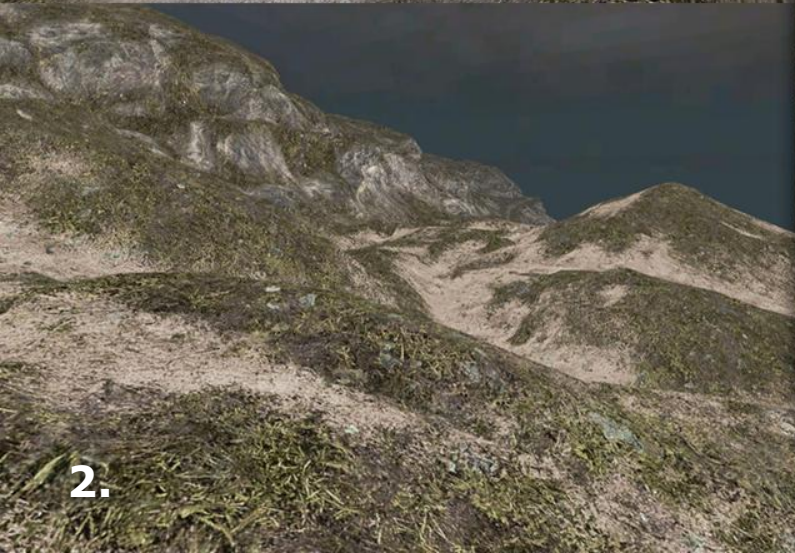


Building the Terrain

1.



2.



3.



Sculpting

Adding in Details



Scene from original

Adding in Details

- Details have to be consistent with the story



Expanding the Story

- Pollution Evident all over the island
- Emphasises the island as an unpleasant place



Expanding the History



- Other Shipwrecks scattered throughout the island

Expanding the History

- Older Shipwrecks suggest a deeper history

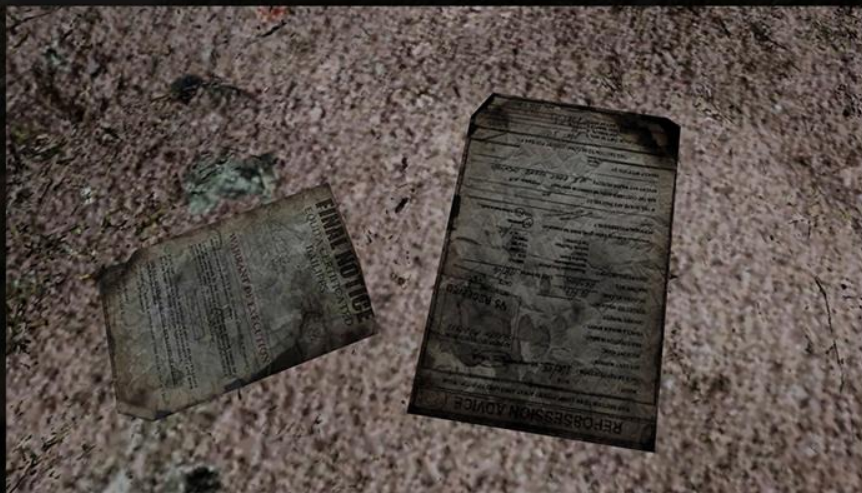
- 
- **These details add consistency to support the reality of the game world – building a past and not just a present.**

Smaller Details

- Randomised
- Reward Exploration
- Connect to the Protagonist's past



Smaller Details



- 
- **protagonist becomes a part of the environment, part of the history and story of the island.**



The Importance of Detail: Bringing the world to life

- 
- **A Static Environment can be detrimental to immersion**





Subliminal Signposts: Creating an emotional connection

Subliminal Signposts

- Indirect and symbolic in nature
- A representation of Images, emotions, thoughts and feelings
- Help build upon the surreal aspects













Conclusion

- The Art style can define your experience and help support your goals
- Not just about creating a physical landscape, but also an emotional one
- All of the details, large and small, are the glue that binds the story to the environment



Questions?