

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Eliza*

Platform: Nintendo Switch, Microsoft Windows, Linux, macOS

Genre: Visual novel, Indie game

Release Date: August 12, 2019

Developer: Zachtronics

Publisher: Zachtronics

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Matthew Seiji Burns

Overview

“...I can imagine the development of a network of computer psychotherapeutic terminals...for a few dollars a session, we would be able to talk with an attentive...non-directive psychotherapist.” – *Official Trailer*

The innovative visual novel *Eliza* makes a bold attempt to directly address an increasingly relevant topic – the future relationship between humans and technologies. Players take on the role of Evelyn, the former designer of the AI program Eliza. Originally created as a “listener” program to mirror people’s words, Eliza has significantly deviated from its intended purpose of use and has been transformed into a commercialized counseling system – without Evelyn’s involvement. After three years of self-isolation due to a tragic incident, we follow Evelyn’s steps as she rejoins society working as a proxy for an Eliza counseling office. Proxies serve as intermediaries in AI counseling sessions, acting as voice actors who read scripted lines generated by Eliza based on clients’ input. This is supposed to add the necessary “human touch” to these sessions. However, because Eliza was never intended to be a counseling tool, it is ill-equipped as a therapist, only mirroring the information given while unable to provide the constructive advice clients desperately need. Unfortunately, tech companies like Skandha, the owner of Eliza, considers consumers as cash crops with their personal information ready to be exploited and abused. There seems to be no stopping AIs like Eliza from taking over the market and possibly, gradually the entire society as more and more human data is fed into its system.

Eliza stands out as a unique piece for its hyper-realistic and in-depth approach to character development and storytelling while addressing a myriad of philosophical and societal topics that are usually difficult to explore and write about. Every character is authentic and interesting, possessing distinct qualities and complex motivations supported by intriguing worldviews. Despite their depth, characters are presented in logical and relatable ways, ready for players to closely analyze and engage with. Through interactions with characters and other in-game elements, players immerse themselves in a world much like our own – one filled with moral dilemmas, ambiguity, and personal confusion, all entangled within the great and complex machine known as society. In this ensemble of imperfect characters, players may recognize traces of themselves. *Eliza* uses its incredible narratives and clever game designs to encourage players to reflect on their personal choices and values. The game is fascinating in that it does not provide a definitive answer to life's difficult questions, nor does it define what is good and evil. Instead, it offers players with a diverse set of ideologies to be openly observed and dissected, judgement free. At the end of this journey, players make new discoveries about responsibilities, morality, and most importantly the legacies they wish to leave behind in this era with rapidly evolving technologies.

Characters

I categorize characters into two types in *Eliza*, the event characters that push the story forward and the client characters that enrich the narratives. There are many clients in this story, I chose three representative ones whose life choices can be influenced by the player character at one important moment towards the end of the game.

- **Evelyn** – The player character of the game. She is a thirty-four-year-old woman with a calming, occasionally somber expression on her face. Evelyn is sensitive, curious, altruistic, empathetic, and unassuming. She is a contemplative philosopher who also possesses advanced skills in technologies that allow her to create complex algorithms like the AI *Eliza*. Depending on player choices, her worldview can shift greatly towards the end of the story. Overall, Evelyn appears as someone who finds life most valuable when she can use her intelligence to make the world a better place.
- **Rainer** – Evelyn's former boss and current CEO of Skandha, the company behind *Eliza*. Rainer is a radical supporter of AI advancing and replacing humans as a superior form of intelligence. He is the classical ambitious and morally questionable tech businessman who stops at nothing to profit from his clients. He believes that all human experiences can be quantified and digitized, entirely represented by data which can then be further exploited for benefits. Although charismatic in style, Rainer at his core prioritizes personal gains and power over anything else. But being the successful entrepreneur he is, Rainer is an exceptional diplomat and persuader, adept at sweet-talking anyone who he believes could be useful to him, often with an almost convincing sense of sincerity.

- **Soren** – An old psychology scholar and former Skandha employee. Soren worked alongside Evelyn and stayed at the company before recently parted ways with Rainer after their clashing of research priorities. As a deeply flawed character, Soren drinks heavily and verbally harass women. Yet Soren can sometimes be oddly honest, admitting that his primary research goal is to numb his own pain, with helping others merely being a “side effect.” Players may even pity him when, in a few of his self-reflective moments, he confesses his inability to take care of his family and as a result, they hate him. He is not someone who completely lacks empathy like Rainer, and between the two, it is hard to judge which one is more “evil.” However, they do share similarities in their obsession over technologies and both love to self-justify.
- **Nora** – Former engineer of Skandha, one of the core members of the original Eliza project, and a close friend to Evelyn. Nora currently works as a DJ and a part-time code contractor. She embodies the tomboy spirit with her blonde hair cut short and has a cheerful, straightforward personality. She rebels against the cold and unscrupulous tech company practices and supports a more human-based approach to technologies. She is highly courageous to leave her engineering specialties and high salaries behind to fully embrace a challenging but exciting lifestyle made of music and self-agency.
- **Damien** – Deceased member of the original Eliza project, former Skandha employee, and close friend to both Evelyn and Nora. The game gives little direct depiction of Damien, a retrospective conversation between the three friends shows that Damien is as altruistic and self-reflective as Evelyn. He encouraged and supported Evelyn to pursue the dream of making “the listener” algorithm, wishing to provide people with emotional support when they are struggling in life. He struggled with his mental health problems and hoped to help others like him in times of need. Damien is optimistic but may be considered naïve and easily manipulated as Evelyn speculates Soren pressured him to consistently overwork which ultimately led to his tragic sudden death.

“There’s so many bad things happening in the world right now...I have this feeling that we’re the ones...we’re the ones who are going to fix it.” – Damien

- **Rae** – Evelyn’s supervisor at an Eliza counseling office. Rae is a young woman with many interesting traits. On one hand, she is a blind follower of the Eliza counseling system, firmly believing in its ability to improve people’s mental health as she once benefited from it. Thus, she would attack any negative reception of Eliza while frequently expressing her admiration for Rainer. She is unable to see the “dark side” of the tech industry where consumers are blatantly exploited by companies. On the other hand, Rae is kind and supportive of her colleagues, often baking cookies to share at the office. This duality makes her interesting and authentic despite being a fictional character.

- **Erlend** – The current project leader for Eliza at Skandha. Erlend is a very young man who recently graduated from college. He is highly talented and looks up to Evelyn's work but admits that there is much he doesn't understand about the algorithm. He feels conflicted about the ethical implications of the AI therapy system and hopes to respect the human data collected as he considers it part the people's existence. His conflict reflects a broader tension between technological advancement and ethical responsibility.
- **Maya** – A client and a struggling comic artist. Maya battles deep-seated issues with self-worth and low self-esteem. She often feels jealous of those who are more successful than her in their creative careers. Maya talks rapidly and is overly self-conscious. As the game progresses, we see her becoming increasingly salty and bitter, but she is relentless and refuses to give up her career despite seeing it failing.
- **Hariman** – A client and a graduate student studying literature. He is intertwined in a love triangle and lies by omission for not confessing that he already has a girlfriend when dating the new girl. Hariman is self-centered and has fluctuating self-esteem; sometimes he considers himself unworthy of others' love but other times he displays a sense of entitlement for the affection he receives. Over the course of three sessions, he begins to talk about women in a derogatory way; he can become self-reflective, however, if players choose to point out his faults in an important game moment towards the end.
- **Gabriel** – A client and expectant father. Gabriel is overwhelmed by anxiety about the heavy responsibilities of parenthood. He is unsure if he is ready for a child and fears losing his sense of self once his child is born. Gabriel feels pressured by friends and family to be a good father but deep inside him holds doubts about whether he is ready for this life-changing event.

Breakdown

Eliza is a deeply introspective piece intertwined with various philosophical topics such as the purpose of one's life, the future of humanity, the limitations of technologies, the struggle of mental health, and the sense of marginalization many people experience in their lives. The game has an episodic structure, centering on the counseling sessions with important events involving major non-client characters sprinkled in between, each tackling a diverse set of issues like the ones mentioned above. Every counseling session introduces a client with unique problems. While some clients revisit regularly, others may not. We play as Evelyn who currently works as a proxy. Each time she hears a snippet of clients' lives which gives her a brief update about their mental state and life status. This experience is intriguing and special because we only take a brief peek at clients' inner world through the lenses of their own words. Together with the event characters, Eliza's comprehensive writings paint a rich and fascinating picture of an ensemble of people in society. As players witness slices of stories that embody diverse facets of humanity, we

are drawn to introspection. We inevitably compare these reflections with our own identities, asking – What makes us, *us*?

There are 7 chapters in *Eliza*. Most of the story is relatively linear until, at the end of chapter 6, players make one important decision among many choices that signify Evelyn's final transformation, symbolizing the type of person she will become moving forward. Before delving into the intricacy of the game's content, it is crucial to outline the major events of each chapter. This provides the necessary context for us to understand the different possible transitions of Evelyn's worldviews in the last game chapter.

Chapter 1	Introduction of Evelyn who, after three years of self-isolation, reports at one of Eliza's counseling offices to work as a proxy. A proxy reads the scripted lines that mirror clients' words before giving prescription drugs and virtual simulation recommendations. She reconnects with Nora, her friend and former colleague at Skandha who currently works as a DJ and code contractor.
Chapter 2	Evelyn attends a talk given by her former colleague Soren. He advocates for using direct brain stimulation to induce customized dreams as a way to rid the world of pain. During the event, Evelyn runs into Rainer, her former boss at Skandha. Both Rainer and Soren eagerly persuade her to join their own projects, appealing to her expertise as the original Eliza designer. Evelyn continues to meet with clients who reveal the limitations of Eliza's counseling approach. She begins to question the ethics and purpose of her old work. She witnesses more of Soren's questionable morals and complicated personality. She also attends Nora's concert and sees her new life as a thriving DJ.
Chapter 3	Evelyn visits Rainer at Skandha's headquarters. He shares his ambition for the future, in which AI like Eliza, trained with personal data collected from clients, dominates the human world. Evelyn feels more weight of her past decisions as Eliza's creator. She continues to meet Eliza's clients as a proxy, finding herself unable to give constructive advice based on the AI generated scripts. She bakes cookies at Rae's house upon her invitation, understanding despite being a firm supporter of Eliza, Rae has her warm side and wishes to help others her way.
Chapter 4	Evelyn meets more clients and sees the clear limitations of Eliza as a counseling algorithm. She tries Soren's experimental dream inducing device and learns about his true motivation behind this project – to numb himself from pain. Soren shows his vulnerability and admits to being a pathetic failure in life. Evelyn now faces the growing dilemma about her role in the future of Eliza and whether to remain complicit in Skandha's vision. She also sees a possibility of operating outside the large corporate system and works as a freelancer like Nora.
Chapter 5	Evelyn reads an article about the public's dissatisfaction and doubts of Eliza while Rae bashing the critics. Rainer uses his power to access Soren's personal phone attempting to show Evelyn the "loser" he is, once again persuading her to start working for him. Rainer's action directly demonstrates how power can be

	abused in technology. Evelyn books an Eliza session for herself, experiencing counseling from the other end. She uses the service as a “listener,” self-reflecting while not asking for advice, the way the original design intends to be.
Chapter 6	Evelyn must confront the key players in her story: Rainer, Soren, and Nora, each representing a different vision for the future. She grapples with her own values and ambitions subject to their influence. In this chapter, Evelyn can choose to deviate from AI Eliza’s script in counseling. For the first she can speak with them from a real human’s perspective. Players’ final choice regarding Evelyn’s future at the end of this chapter will determine the story’s final ending.
Chapter 7	The written title “Chapter 7” may not appear during players’ first playthrough depending on their choices. But in general, this is the ending chapter where players see the consequences of the life choice they made for Evelyn.

A Mystery Within a Mystery

The story begins with Evelyn’s monologue against a black screen where she talks about “drifting away inside her dream for too long.” When the scene lights up, we find ourselves sitting on a train heading to work at Eliza, starting a new life after years of shunning away from society. The game deliberately withholds much of Evelyn’s backstory, leaving players to piece together her identity and past as the narrative unfolds. We do experience a sense of loss and depression through Evelyn’s tone, slightly passive demeanor, and the overall cold aesthetics of the game.

Through the emails on Evelyn’s phone and her early conversations with Rae and Nora in the first chapter, players witness fragments of Evelyn’s past. Discontinuous and vague messages suggest that her “hibernation” from the outside world was caused by a tragic incident while working at Skandha. Her choice of secretly working at Eliza as a proxy is unusual due to her previous identity. However, the connections between these elements remain obscured. There exists a thin layer of barrier between players and Evelyn created by this information gap. This subtle barrier encourages players to alternate between embodying Evelyn, the protagonist we control, and observing her from a distance, analyzing the situation that she is in from a much more objective and critical point of view. The game successfully stirs a strong sense of curiosity for the players early into the game, greatly motivating them to explore not only the story at present but also the veiled past in the many chapters to come.

Eliza creates a parallel narrative by introducing two storylines involving the past and present. This structure thickens the plot and further engages the audience by eliciting natural intrigue. This choice of partially hiding the information also serves to develop Evelyn’s character because she subconsciously hides her tragic memories from her conscious mind, a form of coping mechanism, further justifying the game’s narrative design choice based on character psychology. This choice to partially withhold information also contributes to Evelyn’s character development, as it mirrors her own subconscious suppression of the tragic memories as a form of coping mechanism. Such an approach is brilliant as it increases gameplay motivation in a way that simultaneously enriches character psychology. The progression of the story becomes not

only the players' exploration of the unpredictable future but also the introspection of the unforgiving past that consciously shapes a character's worldview, highlighting one of *Eliza*'s core game themes of knowing the past in order to thrive at present and transcend in the future. This philosophy resonates with David Hume's empiricism which posits that we are products of our past experiences, cultural values, and historical context.[1] Throughout the game, *Eliza* continues to draw on these philosophical elements, weaving them into its narratives. The gaming experience becomes a journey of self-discovery and introspection.

Character Personality Reflected in Environmental Storytelling

Despite limited visual dynamics, *Eliza* effectively employs environmental storytelling to enrich its character depiction. In the opening train scene, Evelyn's character blends seamlessly into the crowd. For those familiar with visual novels, most location scenes are typically static backdrops meant to establish the setting. When characters engage in different interactions, often conversations, character illustrations float in front of the location picture as text appears on the bottom of the screen. *Eliza*, however, subverts this convention by placing Evelyn directly within the environment as part of the environmental illustration. Because the title page of the game only features a mysterious back silhouette of Evelyn, players tend to start the game with very little to no knowledge about what she looks like, not to mention recognizing her.

During the first scene, players are prompted to "observe" other passengers by clicking on highlighted sections marked with white rhomboids. Naturally, players ignore objects that are not "interactable," hence once again overlooking the fact that Evelyn, the protagonist whose voice we've just heard, sits right in front of our eyes. This clever design reflects Evelyn's own sense of detachment and invisibility within groups of people, subtly reinforcing her feelings of isolation and disconnection from the world around her. Players hear Evelyn's voice, reading texts about her personal thoughts and observations, yet fail to identify her in the picture which tells us much about her characterization. She is a thinker and observer of society but is rather reserved and avoids standing out from the crowds. The game slides the player into Evelyn's shoes right from the start, smoothly creating immersion meanwhile establishing Evelyn as a character.



Scene in Chapter 1, section - Light Rail

A Seamless Flow into the Story World

Among visual novels, *Eliza* is one of the best at integrating game tutorials and objectives with natural storytelling. In film or theater language, the concepts of “diegetic” and “non-diegetic” describe elements that exist within the story world or those that do not.[2] *Eliza* excels in maintaining immersion by avoiding non-diegetic disruptions like showing text that says “press this button to proceed” or “click here to see live tasks” on the screen. Instead, the game fully grounds its mechanics in the story world. Aside from Evelyn’s internal monologue, there is no explanatory voiceover directing players or telling them how to interpret events. Everything lies in players’ discretion as they navigate through a well-developed guidance system.

When Evelyn reports at the Eliza counseling office for the first time, players are greeted by Rae, the supervisor. She patiently explains how the AI counseling system works and leaves players plenty of room to self-explore during actual sessions with clients. Rae functions as the beginner’s guide in a game but our conversation with her feels authentic and the tasks given to us make sense in the context. When each session is completed, players receive ratings and tips given by the clients they counseled. Although players’ input during the sessions is fixed, seeing the ratings provides positive feedback that confirms with the players “You’re on the right track.” These diegetic designs guide players in a natural, nonintrusive way, teaching us the controls and rules of the game without breaking immersion.

Players can gain new insights about Evelyn and many other characters through conversations, texts, and emails on the phone during different story stages. A great moment that best demonstrates the approach “show, don’t tell” is when Erlend, the current Eliza project leader, interviews Evelyn about her past to better understand the program’s origins and design philosophy. These interactions with Erlend take place across multiple scenes in both forms of texts and talks, each uncovering new insights about Evelyn. Players uncover her hidden secrets not via personal monologues which would have been boring resembling information dumping. On the contrary, the story is told through in-game characters’ active interactions. By doing so it brings much liveliness and authenticity to gameplay. It is exciting when Erlend asks, essentially on behalf of the players, what happened to Evelyn that triggered her abandonment of Eliza and resignation from Skandha. It turns out that her teammate and close friend Damien died from overworking himself, possibly pressured by Soren, the psychiatrist on the team. Because this information is revealed within game interactions, not in straight giveaways in forms of self-narration done by Evelyn, the revelation feels surprising and impactful.

From the very beginning, *Eliza* provides the player with all the necessary tools to fully explore and immerse in the story world. The diegetic storytelling does not end with text-based communications but is further integrated into other forms of gameplay. On Evelyn’s phone exists a mobile game players can actually play. “Solitaire” is adapted from the traditional Japanese card game “株札” (*kabufuda*), loosely translates to “share of cards.” The rules are simple requiring players to swap and regroup cards of the same kind under a few restrictions. Strategic planning is required, as some swaps are irreversible, and if no moves are left, the game must be reset, symbolizing the game over for the current attempt.

This game is introduced to the players when Evelyn says she'll "take a few minutes to calm down" after meeting with a particularly intense client. *Eliza* clearly has every design baked into the narratives that each new element added has an explanation and purpose in the game world.

At first glance, Solitaire is a game that adds flavors and changes the pacing of the story while not breaking immersion since the game is played on Evelyn's phone, the very device she uses to check emails and reply to texts. However, Solitaire reveals deeper narrative significance later when Maya, a client, draws a parallel between Solitaire and her life perspective: "I get stuck a lot [in the game] and I've been just resetting it because I'm not good enough to think that far ahead all the time... You know, if something isn't working [in life] then you have to reevaluate it and maybe... try it again..." Solitaire the card game teaches players an important lesson that it is not shameful nor scary to reevaluate previous choices if we get stuck.

When I reached this story moment as a player, I was blown away by *Eliza*'s overarching design, and how it weaves its small phone game element into the broader narrative. It became evident that from the very moment I started playing Solitaire, the writer had been setting up this story revelation about the card game's underlying philosophy. Everything tied back beautifully to the story theme of gaining insights about oneself from various forms and media. When I played Solitaire like the character Maya, we both repeatedly reset our hands. The game designer wishes to share this insight with the audience that making mistakes and starting over again is more than acceptable. The game of *Eliza* uses many such designs to show how immersive storytelling can be exceptionally done with diegetic elements and careful planning, resulting in a truly cohesive and rich experience.

Manifesting Realism

Realism is a challenging concept to define and capture in literature. William Dean Howells described it as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material." [3] Nowadays, visual novels cover a variety of genres and topics, yet few embrace and portray realism as effective and elegant as *Eliza*. There are barely any dramatic scenes in this story where characters scream, yell, attack, or die. Nevertheless, the plot remains deeply engaging, driven by the abundant inner turmoil and strong emotions that surge within the characters' psychology. Their true intentions often emerge through varying tones, subtle actions, and shifting attitudes. Although characters in *Eliza* behave in a relatively subdued manner in comparison to many visual novel counterparts, the absence of overt drama is replaced with a richness in conflict, resulting in profoundly intriguing and relatable scenarios for the audience. By focusing on psychological depth and authentic interactions, *Eliza* demonstrates how realism can be both quiet and profoundly impactful.

In one of Evelyn's therapy sessions, she meets an elderly woman named Holiday. She initially claims to have no particular reason to be here, stating she's merely curious about "...what all this fuss is about." However, as the session progresses, Holiday's guards begin to lower, revealing her hidden anxieties and mental health struggles. Clues in her endless rambling

suggest that she is addicted to prescription drugs and is struggling with finances and her relationship with families. Her conversation gradually shifts from nostalgic storytelling to ranting about the high cost of living, corruption in public construction projects, and possibly sharing drugs with her neighbors. Despite her evident challenges, Holiday never explicitly admits she needs help, maintaining a facade of self-sufficiency.

Playing as Evelyn the proxy, we encounter many clients that say one thing but really mean another, sometimes completely self-contradictory. Like real-life people, these fictional characters avoid confronting their issues instead resorting to self-denial, distraction, or blaming others. This style of dialogue feels realistic and relatable to a broad audience. Quite frequently, when facing difficult situations, a million thoughts and concerns rush through our minds even before we open our mouths. Thus, the words that finally come out tend to have some level of dishonesty. In Holiday's case, she may be ashamed of her current self and thus is reluctant to confess her substance abuse problems and financial issues. Whatever the specifics, one thing is certain: characters like Holiday are well-crafted and convincing, showing the audience the vulnerability and imperfection of us as human beings.

Aside from exploring life crises, *Eliza* subtly hints at potential romantic dynamics among its characters. These interactions are deliberately kept inconspicuous to stay consistent with the overall realistic narrative style. Similar to how a lot of romances play out in reality, individuals do so much testing and probing before actually stepping into the relationship. For example, Soren, the psychiatrist and former colleague, once comments on Nora's (former colleague and goof friend) "extra investment" in Evelyn. Nora's potential interest in Evelyn may be supported by another story snippet where Nora invites Evelyn to stay overnight for hangout and acts a bit uneasy. There exists another possible romance line between Evelyn and Rainer, her former boss. Nora at one point hints that Rainer might have a special interest in Evelyn when he texts her late at night despite only discussing work related issues. Similarly, Rae notices Rainer seems to pay extra attention to Evelyn's move since her return to work. Further evidence emerges when, in one of the game's endings if players choose to return to Skandha, Rainer invites Evelyn to have a cup of tea with him. In his original words, Rainer says to Evelyn, "We'll watch the singularity [humanity being replaced by AI] happen... Together."

Given the numerous conflicting interests and the multiple layers of identity intertwined among these characters, it is realistic that neither Nora nor Rainer would openly express their feelings for Evelyn, assuming the speculations about their relationships are accurate. If Nora harbors romantic feelings for Evelyn, she risks jeopardizing their friendship by confessing if her emotions are not reciprocated. For Rainer, his motives are far more complicated. While he may have personal interests in Evelyn, his primary goal is to retain her as a top programmer to advance Skandha's ambitions. So, it is quite difficult for him to say confidently that he likes Evelyn as a person, not a tool he can maneuver. This ambiguity is further heightened in a clever and almost comedic moment where Rainer accidentally calls Evelyn "Eliza" instead of her real name. The slip is laden with meaning because Eliza reflects the historical roots of AI in simulating human conversation back in the 1960s.[4] We as the players cannot help but wonder

if Rainer is in love with Evelyn the human or Eliza the AI, created by Evelyn with bits of her personality fragments sprinkled into the design.

Every character in *Eliza* behaves accurately and consistently according to their personal backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and personalities. This is one of the best kinds of writing where every act is backed up by evidence and logic, providing the audience the important opportunities to study well fleshed-out characters up close through which they gain valuable insights about themselves and others. The process of uncovering these authentic and multifaceted characters is deeply fulfilling. Players take on the role of detectives, sifting through distractions and picking out the broken pieces of information that can be assembled into the true image of each individual character. In a strikingly meta sense, *Eliza* the game functions as the mirror Evelyn originally intended the AI to be – a tool for self-reflection. Evelyn describes Eliza as an algorithm that reflects users' words back to them, encouraging introspection. Similarly, as an interactive narrative, *Eliza* serves as a mirror for the players, inviting them to analyze and internalize the story's information in ways that resonate with them personally. This perhaps is one of the most significant values of a well-written story and an excellent visual novel: to inspire readers to reflect on meaning and purpose in context that is close to them.

Humans, AI, and the Future

“I feel like, maybe I was really really wrong...I wanted to create something that would help people, but...those emotions [the pain, anger, and disappointment] just get fed into this thing...ground up and turn into data and become part of Eliza.” – Evelyn

As players delve deeper into the story, we may find ourselves grappling with recurring questions: What defines human experience? What makes us, *us*? And most importantly, why do I need to know?

Almost all the clients in the story use the Eliza counseling service because they are unhappy about their status quo. Their dissatisfaction often stems from poor decisions made, intrinsic personality flaws, or a combination of both. While it's easy to make a broad claim that “being human is about experiencing different emotions and events in life,” this definition feels incomplete and empty. After all, not everyone has the opportunity to experience life fully – consider those in comas or, like Damien in the story, those who have passed away. Does this mean they are no longer human? Were they only partially human? Or were once humans? This may feel like nitpicking at definitions, but these questions are crucial if we are to meaningfully address existential crises.

Assuming the above-mentioned definition regarding the human experience has its validity, we still have yet answered the “why” question. What is it that we are here to fulfill in this short life? In *Eliza*, a client named Darren sees life as endless miseries combined with absolute absurdity. He argues, “We’re being cruel to each other just to be cruel...The people who run things don’t care about anything except themselves and we don’t stop them.” Darren’s nihilistic approach reflects a recurring theme in *Eliza*: characters grappling with their vulnerability in the face of an uncaring world and their powerlessness to change what lies outside

their control. It is likely at some moments in our lives, we share a similar sentiment with Darren's: "Why should anyone bother?" Perhaps there will never be a definitive answer to questions on this level of abstraction, and truth to one person may be meaningless to another. What makes *Eliza* an exceptional piece is that it does not avoid discussing these questions with its audience despite not having a clear-cut answer. The game invites its audience to reflect, explore, and find their own interpretations.

The three main event characters in *Eliza* each present distinct ideologies for players to consider when envisioning the future for mankind. Rainer represents the extreme activist, advocating for humans to be replaced by AI as the next step in evolution, seeing it as a superior form of intelligence. Soren is the escapist who runs away from reality, proposing technology-induced dreams as a way to permanently avoid all the pain and suffering of reality. Nora is the rebel who abandons society's stereotypes and doctrines while alternatively choose to take on the risk of becoming a freelancer and code contractor.

As the game approaches its conclusion, players are faced with a pivotal decision: to align with one of these perspectives or to reject them all, leaving everything behind and embarking on a new, unwritten chapter of life. In the final stages of the game, each character actively persuades Evelyn to adopt their ideology. For instance, Soren's perspective can be particularly tempting to some. If life is too complex and riddled with suffering, why not retreat into a virtual reality where happiness is guaranteed, and pain is nonexistent? After all, the world's problems seem insurmountable, and an individual's existence may appear insignificant on a larger scale.

No solution is perfect. Players are simply encouraged to explore different possibilities both within and outside of the game. Ultimately, it is up to the player to decide which set of beliefs resonates most with them, understanding that perspectives may also evolve and change over time. The game subtly underscores that the best we can do is to remain open to a diverse range of ideas, enriching our understanding of the world. By expanding our knowledge, we may one day come closer to finding answers, even if they remain distant for now.

In the story, Erlend represents the new generation of programmers just entering the tech industry, open to new possibilities. Unlike Rainer who is an unscrupulous businessman who happily abuses technologies for personal gain or Evelyn's trio who was overly optimistic during the development of the program, Erlend is both morally concerned and capable of maneuvering technologies. In the game, his journey is largely shaped by players' decisions. Whether to guide him as a mentor and encourage him to tread carefully in the field without giving up on the humanistic approach or to dismiss him and treat him as a nameless tech-newbie, leaving him to his own struggles is entirely up to the player's choice. Regardless of what players picked, the one takeaway is clear: possibilities are always available to those who are willing to try and seek new solutions. Hopefully, we all can leave some positive legacy for future generations to come.



Eliza – game cover

Strongest Element

It is evident by this point that many characters in *Eliza* are deeply flawed. One, however, stands out the most – Hariman, a literature graduate student and a client. Initially, Hariman appears insecure, lacking the confidence to confess his feelings to Sylvia, a woman in his program. He flaunts his academic knowledge, often referencing famous literature and using sophisticated language, but despite his ego, his longing for Sylvia comes across as genuine. However, in his second session, shocking revelations are unfolded. Hariman admits that he already has a girlfriend Liz, and despite this, also has slept with Sylvia. The man cheated on Liz while lying by omission to both women. In his final session, Hariman remains self-centered, speaking about his future being at risk and continuing to talk about both women in a derogatory manner. The sudden change in gameplay happens here when players can finally speak from the perspective of a human (Evelyn herself) instead of reading off the AI script. Prior to this point in the game, players are only provided with the choice of following Eliza's lines. This newly found player agency gives players a strong sense of satisfaction as we are finally "freed" from the AI's control. We are given the exciting opportunity to point out Hariman's fault but in a constructive way that helps him see his true self. When Evelyn asks him to question his own selfishness and reflect on how his terrible choices affected Liz and Sylvia, to my surprise yet again, Hariman has a turnaround by confessing "...[I] should probably think about something other than...[myself]." Among the many characters, Hariman is not particularly important plot-wise. But the many surprises in his plot twists and character setup make him interesting and memorable. Further, his transformation after Evelyn's intervention shows just how important and valuable real human interactions are to one another, completely unreplaceable by AI.

Unsuccessful Element

Given that the game is a visual novel with relatively linear narratives, there is little to critique in terms of game mechanics, as gameplay primarily involves clicking buttons and reading text. If I were to suggest one change, it would be to adjust Soren's character writing to make him less morally despicable. To clarify, this is more a matter of the writer's choice than a fundamental flaw, and I understand why Soren's portrayal as a workplace harasser is a good choice for the story. For one, it raises awareness about serious issues like sexual misconduct.

My argument as to why I would eliminate Soren's harassment on Nora and potentially Evelyn is that the current design distracts players from further considering his vision of the future, which is eliminating pain by inducing customized dreams, an idea that could have been enticing. Because in his current state, I as the player would turn him down immediately and reject any possibility of working with him as Evelyn, given that he is a creep. On the contrary, if we make Soren more sympathetic and perhaps still morally questionable but in a less obviously repulsive way, players may take the time to fairly weigh his proposal and reflect more deeply on this fascinating idea. As a game designer, I am particularly interested in challenging players with equally compelling choices, forcing them to closely evaluate those options before reaching a conclusion.

In addition, I would like to point out an observation that caught my notice. It could very likely be a coincidence but there seems to be one and only one "good and alive" male character in this game, Erlend, the young programmer who refuses to treat data collected from human users as exploitable assets. Other than Erlend, every male character that I as Evelyn interacted with has some deep moral issues that make them immediately unlikable. Personally, I would strive to make my characters more balanced and avoid associating certain qualities with specific demographics and genders to reduce possible biases. Nevertheless, this is only my opinion and may not be necessary or applicable to this piece.

Highlight

While working as a proxy at the Eliza counseling office, Evelyn – and by extension, we as players – are never given the opportunity to deviate from the AI-generated script. That is, until chapter 6 of the game. In this pivotal moment, while speaking with three former clients – Maya, Hariman, and Gabriel – players are finally able to respond as a human rather than as a passive voice for the AI. We can suggest to Maya that it might be time to consider a different career path, urge Hariman to stop being so self-centered, and tell Gabriel, an expectant father overwhelmed by his responsibilities, to stop pretending to be perfect for his family while still doing his best. The game deliberately gave players no agency to "speak human" until the last moment where Evelyn risks losing her job by deviating from the AI script hence allowing players like me to finally gain self-agency and freedom.

Prior to this game moment, Evelyn reads every scripted line mechanically, responding emotionlessly to clients desperate for answers and solutions. No matter how much I, as the

player, sympathized with them, all I could do was offer impersonal recommendations for drugs and virtual games. The experience of being able to help evokes the emotions of Catharsis as I've been waiting for this freedom for too long. Although I risk losing my job as a proxy, the value of finally helping others by providing them with sincere advice is beyond measure. The power of empathy and projection made me so invested that I genuinely felt like I had positively influenced their lives despite knowing "this is just a game."

Furthermore, this scene serves as a powerful turning point for Evelyn as a character. As the creator of Eliza's original algorithm, Evelyn blames herself for the harm the AI has caused as an ill-equipped counseling product. Thus, when she chooses to give personal advice to Maya, Hariman, and Gabriel in her own words, symbolizing her redemption and self-acceptance. By deviating from the AI's script, Evelyn takes her first step toward "undoing" the harm she feels she has caused, as small as the step may be in the grand scheme of things. In risking her job and defying the system, she begins to transcend her sorrow and regret, reclaiming her agency. This moment signals the start of her transformation as she becomes empowered and brave enough to accept her mistakes, move forward, and possibly create remedies in the near future.

Critical Reception

The Gamer – Jamie Latour – 4/5: Latour praises *Eliza* for its "excellent" writing and "snappy and genuine" dialogues. He appreciates the game's focus on ethical issues surrounding technology and mental health. He finds the idea of using AI to help improve human mental health "tremendously interesting" and is a "thought-provoking premise." While Latour points out that the gameplay is relatively limited given the entirety of the game's interactions involve clicking with the mouse while the story being quite linear, he notes that *Eliza* is well-designed for a visual novel, offering solid complexity and story depth.[6]

Kotaku – Gita Jackson: Gita Jackson describes *Eliza* as a visual novel that raises critical ethical questions about technology and big data. They express concern over companies like Skandha in the game collecting personal information without proper consent. Jackson writes, "Perhaps there is no fulfilling end to *Eliza* because the questions it asks have no clear answers." Although they criticize Evelyn as a character being overly passive and unresponsive, Jackson finds the *Eliza* technology fascinating and considers the ethical dilemmas it presents worth exploring further.[5]

Lessons

Put your players in the shoes of your protagonist.

Evelyn's design in *Eliza* is successful because players' interests and knowledge generally line up well with hers. At the start of the game, Evelyn is oblivious to how the Eliza counseling system works the same as the players. Players learn to operate as a proxy "with" Evelyn which adds

authenticity and immersion to the player experience. Evelyn is motivated to understand her clients and study their psychology the same way that many visual novel readers do. Furthermore, both the players and Evelyn would like to confront and understand her past. Seeing her making peace with herself at the end is emotionally fulfilling for both parties, the character and the player. By ensuring that the player's motivations rarely deviate from Evelyn's, *Eliza* maintains engagement and narrative coherence. The game demonstrates how to create smooth and immersive gameplay by successfully merging player goals with characters' goals by placing them in parallel, both in cognitive and emotional states.

Show don't tell.

Eliza avoids lecturing or using heavy-handed narration, delivering every piece of information about its characters and world dietetically through conversations, texts, and emails. The game's interface is minimalistic, with nearly all elements serving a diegetic purpose: phone messages, images, and the Eliza headpiece projecting AI scripts and client details. The only non-diegetic element, the menu option, is subtle, taking the form of three faint lines in the upper-right corner of the screen. The storytelling and character portrayal are highly effective, as characters come to life organically through dialogue and phone interactions. Players learn about them naturally, piecing together their stories through observation rather than exposition. If there is a "good way" to tell a story, then showing them directly to players with meaningful interactions and little distraction as done in *Eliza* is the way to go.

Don't be afraid to tackle big questions.

Abstract philosophical topics and complex societal problems are difficult to write and manage in games but one should not be intimidated by them and shun away from creative pursuit. I highly appreciate *Eliza*'s approach where it presents the audience with a variety of standpoints for the player to choose from and reflect on. There is often no singular correct answer to these types of questions but providing players with the precious space to intellectually discuss and analyze them is invaluable and necessary. After all, games can be both entertaining and thought-provoking, providing players with various forms of value and satisfaction.

Summation

Eliza is one of the few visual novels that focuses on realism and addresses serious societal and philosophical topics for a mature mind. It shows us the great potential that games as a media can have – to inspire and challenge players intellectually, encouraging them to self-reflect openly and consistently. This reminds me of Sabrina Culyba's idea for "transformational games" where the influences of the game "transfer and persist beyond the game." [7] Games hold great values besides entertainment. As seen in *Eliza*, we as players will always reconsider our relationships with technologies and humanity long after gameplay is over. This type of intellectually inspirational quality is what makes *Eliza* a unique and timeless piece regardless of how advanced technologies will become in the upcoming future.

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