# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Eversion/eversion HD*
**Platform:** PC (Freeware or through Steam)
**Genre:** 2-D Platformer, Horror, Indie
**Release Date:** Freeware – December 16, 2008[1]; Steam – June 7, 2010[2]
**Developer:** Zaratustra Productions
**Publisher:** Zaratustra Productions
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Guilherme Stutz Töws
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**Cover Page:** Official promotional art by Lee-Ham of deviantART.

## Overview

"Sounds – possibly musical – heard in the night from other worlds or realms of being."
–   H. P. Lovecraft

These are the words that greet the player on beginning *Eversion*, and aside from the brief statements in the read me file ("princess is kidnapped; you must save princess") make up the entire extent of the exposition.  From there, the player navigates through the initially bright and cheerful world, discovering various points at which to "evert", transforming the entire environment around them as they enter a new "layer" of the world.  Layers can generally only be traversed sequentially, e.g. only layers 1 and 3 are available for eversion when in layer 2, and changes between any two neighboring layers are small.  But as further layers are reached, these changes begin to add up: the environment goes from vibrant to muted to foreboding to dark, becoming a twisted, alien landscape; the music starts bright and cheerful, becoming ever more sombre until it is nothing but the sound of a beating heart; gems collected along the way change from blue to red to grey, ending as skulls.  As the hero delves deeper into enemy territory, the very land itself descends into madness.

It should be noted that there are two different releases of *Eversion*: The freeware edition, which was created as an entry for a freeform competition based on *The Commonplace Book*[3], and a commercial edition on Steam (named *eversion HD*) which features improved visuals, reworked music, achievements, and even a time trial mode.  The Steam version also offers a bit more exposition upon which to construct the narrative: "The Princess of the Flower Kingdom has vanished! She was taken by the Ghulibas of the north, and it is up to brave Zee Tee to rescue her. On his quest, he - and you - will discover the hidden lands behind the peaceful kingdom, and come face to face with secrets that will set you on edge!"

# Characters

I will be making reference to a method of describing character psychology that Andrew Glassner calls the Nested Masks[4] in order to extrapolate character from symbolic story elements. There are four levels to these masks: the True Self, describing the character's soul or essence, and the source of their impulses and desires; the Conscience, consisting of the True Self's impulses as filtered through a character's values; the Self-Image, which shapes a character's values into desires via a self-constructed perception of themselves; and the World Mask, the last filter that takes into account the world surrounding the character and the perception of them by others.

While these masks are geared specifically towards characters, they also happen to share certain correlations with classical interpretations of the world, which I will call Elemental[5] (earth, water, air, fire) and Dimensions of Being (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual). While these are important concepts to keep in mind while analyzing *Eversion*'s narrative, to avoid getting into too much detail I'll simply draw the general parallels between the systems:

Fire – Spiritual – True Self
Air – Mental – Conscience
Water – Emotional – Self-Image
Earth – Physical – World Mask

In this way, water can be related to a character's emotional state and perception of themselves, things of the air to mental state and the nature of their thoughts, etc.

One last system of symbolic interpretation I'll make reference to is the Native American mandala[6]. These are tied to the cardinal directions, each of which has a slew of symbols and meanings attached to them. For my purposes, I will be drawing from the following interpretations:

North – Knowledge & Wisdom
East – Illumination & Enlightenment
West – Introspection & Intuition, Change & Transition
South – Trust & Innocence

- **Zee Tee** – Zee Tee is the protagonist of *Eversion*. Aside from his outward appearance and the mention of his name in the Steam blurb, there is very little explicit description of him. In a way, this lack of information helps solidify Zee Tee as the player avatar by bypassing the possible barriers of characterization and forcing players to fill his personality with a mental projection of themselves. As well, his iconic appearance aids in this placement of the self within the game; as Scott McCloud has observed, "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm."[7]

  Further inspection of the protagonist's name reveals another layer of meaning. "Zee Tee" is a phonetic spelling of zeta[8], which is the greek word for seven[9]. There are seven layers of eversion to the game world beyond the initial stage that is set. In this way, a direct correlation between the protagonist and the environment is made. The journey becomes not just a road of conflict, but also a juxtaposition of his world mask and true self. The starting world, the brightest and happiest, is both the layer that masks the darker ones lurking beneath it and

the mask that Zee Tee displays to the world, with each further layer mirroring his disposition and showing more and more of his true self.

His appearance also holds additional meaning in that he shares certain physical similarities with the scarlet pimpernel[10], a flower which only opens itself to sunlight. Thus Zee Tee's journey into the dark realms of the world depicts the strength of his resolve to continue on his quest in the face of situations from which he would normally close himself off.

- **Princess of the Flower Kingdom** – *Eversion*'s damsel in distress. She too bears a striking resemblance to a flower, the Western Wallflower[11]. "Western" can be directly connected to the west section of the mandala, that of introspection and transition. As the environment reflects Zee Tee's true self, the Princess embodies both his initial lack of introspection and his desire to change. A wallflower can refer to someone who sits at the sidelines of a dance, or to any person or group of people forced to the sidelines of an activity[12]. The first plays into the stereotypical captive princess, and implies a kind of shyness. However the second, along with the fact that she is essentially nameless, reinforces the idea that she represents introspection for Zee Tee, and that she has been pushed to the far corner of his mind.
- **Ghulibas** – The enemies found in the world of *Eversion*. "Ghuliba" is an Arabic word meaning "to be defeated, to be overpowered, to be overcome."[13] As they hail from the north, the mandala comes into play again, with north denoting knowledge and wisdom. Combined together, the Ghulibas are shown to be symbolic of the trials that the hero must overcome in order to gain wisdom.

## Breakdown

*Eversion*'s narrative is told within two intertwined structures: the story structure of the Hero's Journey[14]. While there are two endings to the game, it is impossible to see the second without having witnessed the first, and the second ending contains a repetition of steps in the Hero's Journey. The Journey plays out as follows:

1. The Ordinary World – levels 1, 2, and the first half of 3 all mainly involve the benign layers of eversion, and set the stage for the rest of the game.
2. Tests and Enemies – this step is essentially repeated throughout the entire game, in every level, simultaneously testing Zee Tee's character and the player's skills. In a normal run of the game, i.e. without collecting all the gems, these are the Ghulibas and the various hazards of the layers of eversion.
3. The Call to Adventure – while this has technically already happened in the game's brief exposition, the second half of level 3 brings attention to the true adventure underfoot in the form of a creeping wave of darkness. This dark wave doubles as foreshadowing for the tone of the rest of the game.
4. Refusal of the Call – Zee Tee runs from the dark wave, both out of necessity to save himself and a denial of the nature of the world (and himself). While everting is an action that is deliberately taken, the call is refused because Zee Tee himself doesn't change; his appearance is untouched throughout a majority of the game.

5. Crossing the Threshold – level 4 thrusts Zee Tee into a new, more terrifying layer of eversion, via a face box that alters the environment rather than relinquish a gem.  Again, while everting is a deliberate action – and essentially a kind of threshold crossing in and of itself – this event represents a stage of the hero's journey because it is an irreversible event that puts Zee Tee in conflict.
6. Approaching the Cave #1 – in the course of the game's normal ending, level 6 is the second to last level, the last trial before the main ordeal.  It also happens to be a reprise of the Call to Adventure and its Refusal, with a second, more sinister wave that Zee Tee flees.
7. The Ordeal #1 – level 7 is the last of the regular set of levels.  It is the longest level yet, and takes place mainly in the deepest layer of eversion seen up to this point.
8. The Reward – as Glassner states, the Reward "is the moment when the hero attains the overt goal of his quest."  The first part of the ending sequence is just that: Zee Tee has attained the presence of the Princess.  But this is quickly subverted as she is revealed to be a monster, and the protagonist meets his end.
9. Additional Tests – at this point, collecting or having already collected all the gems is another test that Zee Tee and the player can take upon themselves in an attempt to unlock the true final level of the game.  Gathering all the gems requires that levels be played nonlinearly, everting back and forth between various layers.  In this way, a mastery over everting can be said to have been gained, and even over crossing thresholds themselves.
10. Approaching the Cave #2 – with all the gems collected, level 7 becomes the second to last level, and must be entirely traversed in the darkest, most terrifying layer of eversion.  This time there is even someplace to enter, a dark castle newly revealed.
11. The Ordeal #2 – level 8 consists of the final set of tests before the game's true lysis can be achieved, depicted as an uncontrollably shifting maze in the freeware version and a final series of trials spanning all the layers of the world in the Steam version.  This constitutes the most interesting and prominent difference between the two versions of the game, with each version offering a unique view of the ultimate trial.
12. The Reward Again – the same as the first time around, except that instead of ending the game with this subverted…
13. Resurrection – …Zee Tee is also revealed to be a monster now that he can finally see and understand the world around him.

While the Hero's Journey provides a framework for the events of the game, it is the layers of the game world that give them narrative context and make the game meaningful and memorable, painting a picture of a person in conflict with himself.

1. "Assumption" – This is the initial layer of the world, the Ordinary World, the basis against which to compare all the other layers.  It is everted step by step over the layers until it has been turned completely inside out.  Though it's the only layer that isn't expressly named through a Steam achievement, I find the name appropriate according to its overall purpose.  At this point, Zee Tee is

psychologically in command: the world around him is solid (earth, stability – bricks don't break at all, plants are harmless, trees are solid), he is cheerful (water – blue and swift), his thoughts light rational (air – clouds can't be stood on).

2. Deception – The first layer of eversion is very similar to Assumption, but the colors of everything in the environment are slightly more muted. Zee Tee is still cheery (slower moving water), but the most marked change is in his thoughts, which attempt to deny that anything is different (clouds can be stood on, and in the Steam version have visible screws holding them up).

3. Erosion – Colors continue to become more somber, and in the Steam version various environmental elements show signs of wear. Zee Tee's assumptions are beginning to lose strength, and he starts questioning himself (clouds can still be stood on, and in Steam are wearing away; clouds in the background are suspended by strings). His mood has become more serious, more troubled (murky water), and he is slightly unnerved (can pass by dead trees).

4. Desolation – The sky has turned green, like in the calm before a storm. Rational thought has left Zee Tee (clouds absent), he is even more worried (murkier water), and the first major cracks in the world begin to show (brick blocks have cracks and can be broken).

5. Apprehension – The world takes on unnatural colorations, the sky overhead a dull brown and the earth below ashen grey; strange shapes begin to emerge from the hillsides in the background of the Steam version. Zee Tee is now beginning to unhinge emotionally (hands reaching out from swift, grey waters).

6. Confusion – The world becomes treacherous, and more alien. Zee Tee's thoughts return to him, but they are now disturbed (strangely-shaped clouds in background of Steam version), the earth is unstable and dangerous (brick blocks are destroyed when walked on, flowers have become thorned plants that kill on contact), and he is nervous, fearful (very swift-moving water). On another level, the rules of the universe seem to be changing or losing meaning altogether (score displays a rapidly-changing, random number; deaths result in sprays of blood; alternate, unsettling messages appear instead of the standard "Ready!").

7. Commotion – The world is almost unrecognizable, earth and sky alike shades of red, with only the sound of Zee Tee's heartbeat to accompany it. He is terrified (water orange and bubbling – possibly now lava, signifying his getting closer to the spiritual truth of the matter) and the land itself moves to overtake him (stones introduced in Confusion becoming enemies). The laws of the old reality barely apply anymore (gems are now "????" in the HUD; score is completely absent).

8. Induction – The world is now a realm of shadow, alien in all aspects. Zee Tee is absolutely terrified, pushed to the calm beyond fear (water becoming still blood), and with no way to even begin to come to grips with the world (only HUD element left is the number of gems collected; enemies respawn after dying).

The initial exposition of rescuing a captive princess is false, meant to mask the true problem of Zee Tee being unwilling to acknowledge his less than perfect self, distancing himself from it. But he was unsatisfied with his imperfect understanding of himself, his curiosity nudging him ever closer to insanity as he struggled to reconcile his higher mind with his imperfections. In the end, he was forced to make a nigh impossible choice:

either retain his sense of self and die, or accept his imperfectness and avert madness by becoming one with it.  In this way, *Eversion* touches on part of the nature of humanity: of being consumed by our baser, flawed selves we are afraid; of accepting them as part of us, terrified.

## Strongest Element

The first ending found in the game is potent: after finally overcoming all the trials of all the layers of the world, Zee-Tee comes face to face with the Princess.  She moves towards him, all is well – but suddenly, the landscape turns darker than the darkest layer the player has yet seen, and the Princess herself transforms into a pitch-black, red-eyed monster.  Zee-Tee is forced to confront his shadow as he clings to the self he has known for the entire game.  He can only watch as the Shadow Princess inches closer, ever so slowly, the screen cutting to, "Game Over" just as she reaches him.  The hero has died, the elixir revealed to be poison.  The plot twists, and the age old premise of video games – defeat the bad guys and save the girl – has been turned inside-out, everted.  But as there are still gems to be collected, his is an imperfect understanding, a depiction of the fear of the unknown.

Even stronger is the second ending, which builds upon the first.  This time the hero has collected all the gems.  His understanding is complete, and he braves the newly revealed eighth world.  He finds the Princess once more, and they move to embrace each other.  Again the world shifts, and again the Princess is revealed as shadow.  Except now Zee-Tee also morphs into a horrific form.  He sheds his World Mask, a façade he had presented to both those around him and himself, finally understanding that he is the twisted other he had sought so hard to deny.  His shadow is not someone or something else, but his very own being; we understand as little about ourselves as we do about the unknown.  The game's premise inverts itself a second time, and the player is left to wrestle with this sublime implication.

By sublime, I am referring specifically to the idea that Joseph Campbell spoke of in his discussions with Bill Moyers.  In them, he talks about "the sublime" in terms of, "prodigious energy, force, and power...too vast for the normal forms of life to contain them."[15] Infinite space is a concept that transcends human understanding, and typhoons, volcanoes, and atomic bombs, in addition to this transcendent vastness, appear monstrously destructive.  In this way, we can see the Princess as a Sublime Monster – she presents the final barrier to the completion of the Hero's Journey, the final gatekeeper, and the quandary she presents is nigh irresolvable.

## Unsuccessful Element

In a game so tightly packed with symbolism as *Eversion*, it is difficult to find any elements that have not been put to some narrative or psychological use.  From gems that convey Zee-Tee's gradual revelation of his true self to the score changing uncontrollably in the fifth layer of eversion – even the achievements in the Steam version contribute to some extent, with several naming the particular layers and one in particular, "Metaphor for the Atomic Bomb", revealing a whole new interpretation of the narrative.  The various narrative elements are inseparable from each other, making a unified whole.

I would argue that there is no unsuccessful element. *Eversion* is a work that has realized the Aristotelian dramatic unities – time, place, action – and has succeeded in employing them. As well, there are multiple levels of meaning that can be drawn from the game. On the individual level, the story is one of facing oneself, recognizing the shadow that dwells within and how we actually know so little about ourselves. On a broader level, *Eversion* is an examination of the effect of the discovery of the atomic bomb on humanity, with the princess becoming a symbol of not just one's self, but of humanity's collective soul.

## Highlight

Perhaps the most memorable moment in the game, outside of the endings, is world four. In the previous level, the player had been able to switch between four different layers, switching back and forth to progress and eventually fleeing the approach of an ominous wave of darkness. The fourth starts optimistically with the world in the initial layer and a single box to hit. With no other way to progress, the player does so – and is thrown into a hither-to unseen layer. Everything is suddenly different: the environment is composed of dreary browns and greys, the music conveys a sense of desolation and apprehension, and ghastly hands now rise up unexpectedly from the water. What's worse, there's no way to evert away from this bleak existence. The player is trapped, with moving forward being the only option. While each eversion between one world layer and another can be considered a kind of threshold-crossing, this moment exemplifies the fifth step of the hero's journey. The threshold between the ordinary and special worlds has been crossed – there is no looking back.

## Critical Reception

While there are a number of reviews around the internet, most are of an informal nature, and none analyze the game's story. *Eversion* doesn't even have a Metacritic score, with only one critic having rated it to date[16]. The closest I could find was a review by user psoplayer[17] on the site Giant Bomb. Giving it a 4.5 stars out of 5, they said, "Eversion showcases an awareness of its medium that is essential to any work of art. Though Lovecraft is the only listed inspiration, the developer is able to subvert the expectations of players established by generations of Mario games. Direct visual references are one obvious tool in use, but some instances of clever level design also come in to play before the game is complete."

This isn't surprising. Putting words to something that is essentially wordless is hard. Extracting story from it is even harder, especially when people aren't looking for it. And while some miss the point entirely – like Daniel[18] from The Reviewer Depot with a 5.5/10 review, saying of the normal ending, "Is that it? Seriously?" – to most, the experience is still clearly communicated. Here are some of their reactions:

- Connor Beaton[19] on zConnection International writes, "[I]t's a very creative and disturbing piece of work," giving it a score of 96% (assumedly out of 100).
- TheDustin[20] of Play This Thing! writes, "*Eversion* defies the rule by providing a typically cheery world and slowly letting it decay," and, "It…might even make you freak out here and there." No score was given.

- Margaret Lacey[21] of The Clarion Online writes, "What I will say is that the warning screen-- 'Not intended for children or people of a nervous disposition--' is not a joke."  She also did not give a score.

## Lessons

- Story is psychological.  Symbols are used to access the unconscious, and through this connection tell a story.  There are no voices or dialogue in *Eversion* – every piece of its story is delivered through its visuals and its music.  Even the initial exposition is inferred with a reference to the first level of *Super Mario Bros.*, the first arrangement of bricks and face blocks strongly resembling that initial pyramid of bricks and question mark blocks in Mario's first scrolling adventure.  Because of the direct connection with our senses, and thus our subconscious, it is a story directly felt by the audience rather than indirectly through a mental understanding.
- Psychological engagement makes for a potent experience.  The game's direct interaction with the subconscious gives it a visceral impact, leaving a deeper impression than even well-chosen words. Shadowy creatures are scary in their own right; the Princess being revealed as a creature of shadow is downright terrifying both due to her change in appearance to something other-worldly and the fact that she is the embodiment of Zee Tee's shadow.
- There is no element that can't be used to deepen plot or a player's experience.  Nothing was left without purpose in communicating story to the player: the HUD elements became erratic at deeper levels of eversion; the start message changed at deeper levels of eversion; additional exposition from the Steam description served to add numerous layers of symbolic meaning to the characters.  Not only does this strengthen the game's impact, it unifies the experience as a whole.

## Summation

    *Eversion* is an outstanding example of narrative depth in video games.  It draws from both literary and gaming classics (H. P. Lovecraft and *Super Mario Bros.* respectively) in order to examine the human condition.  It uses very few words, relying on visuals and the language of symbols to build a haunting world, and those that it does use only serve to deepen the experience.  It is a game that defines its value not in the length of its message, but in its depth.

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