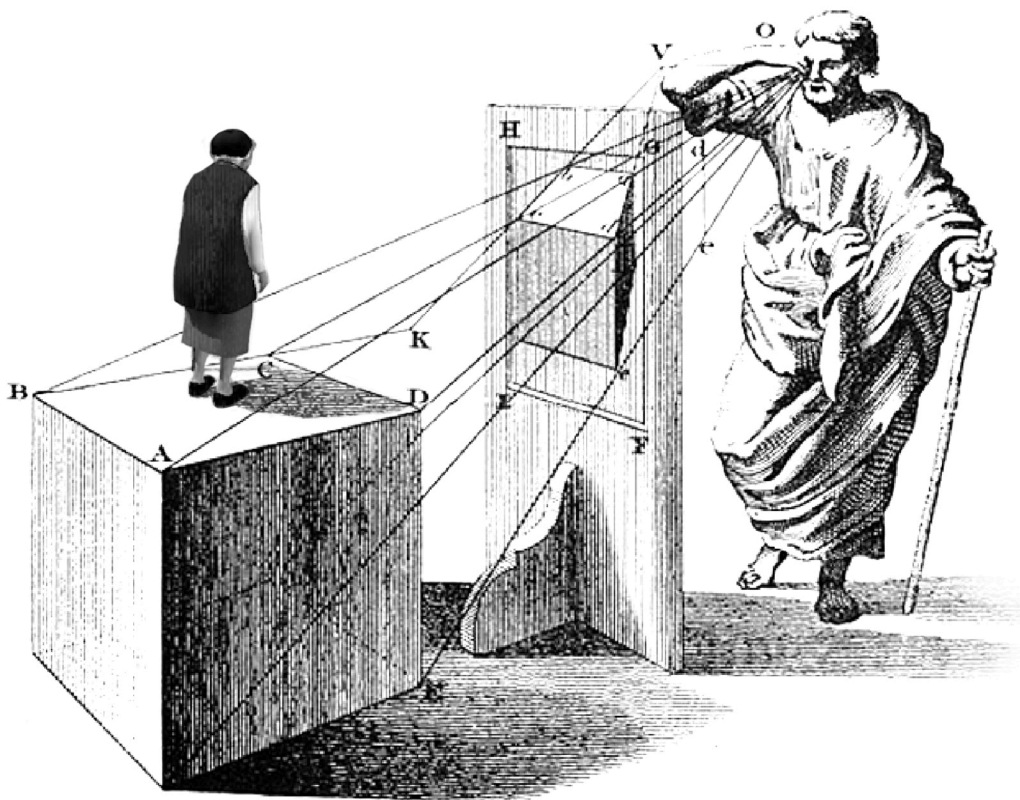# Perspectives of the Avatar

Sketching the Existential Aesthetics of Digital Games

MARTA M. KANIA

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The collage on the cover uses an illustration from *New Principles of Linear Perspective: Or the Art of Designing on a Plane, the Representations of All Sorts of Objects, in a More General and Simple Method Than Has Been Hitherto Done* by Brook Taylor, London: Knaplock, 1719, https://goo.gl/BYNCrB, and a character from *The Graveyard* by Tale of Tales, 2008, http://Tale-of-Tales.com/TheGraveyard

This book is dedicated to the understanding one, with whom I have been thinking, sketching, and discussing during dinners.

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Introductory Notes

The main ambition of the book you are about to read is to sketch the existential aesthetics that explore the situatedness[1] of the individual towards a single player digital game with avatar[2]. The book focuses on games falling within the category of *independent* or *art* games, and builds upon an assumption drawn from existentialism; where the individual facing the world is the central philosophical concern. In this theoretical horizon, a situation can become meaningful only from the point of view of the particular being.

A computer game can be interpreted as part of the everyday world that exists in a specific way (Sageng, et al., 2012; Leino, 2009), namely, as a digital artefact that is designed and interacted with, sold and reviewed, compared to others and discussed. A game is then an artefact that — while becoming a part of multiple discourses — contributes to the world.

Within the existential aesthetics of digital games, the relation of the author to the artefact appears as especially interesting. The originator of the digital artefact is then a first person, who situates the digital artefact within the world; from her perspective, the emerging creation starts to exist in the discourses of game creation. Therefore, in the first part of the book, I will focus on game designers' situatedness towards their own creative work, the artefact, and how it is reflected in particular discourses.

In turn, the second part of the book introduces the perspective of the player, who exercises an opportunity to experience a threefold situatedness. I explore the titular perspectives that designate points of view precisely defined by the composition of the gameworld, and are co-shaped and concretised by the player participating in the in-game situation as a self-avatar. Analogically to the existential concept of being in the world, the proposed model features circularity of being and understanding. It is inextricably bound with the concept of situated being, where an individual discovers the world

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[1] The notion of *situatedness* is widely discussed in the second part of the book, especially in Chapter 2.1 and 2.2.

[2] Independently of the first or third person points of view, i.e. if the avatar can be seen by the player, or is limited to a situated gaze, agency, and outlined as a character.

simultaneously with her situatedness towards it. In consequence, the world can neither be considered from the "neutral" or "objective" point of view, nor can the individual be comprehended as abstracted from the world[3]. As a result, I consider a game as a gameworld that provides the player with a fresh and unique existential situatedness.

One of the major objectives for the existential aesthetics of computer games is then providing a theoretical framework for an understanding of the concrete, individual experiences of the game as interpreted from the first-person perspective (Cf. Leino, 2009, Vella 2013, 2014, 2016). The basic questions to answer are then: who am I in the gameworld? How am I situated within it? How is the meaning of this world established, and what is its aesthetical dimension?

The existential interpretation of the game is based on an assumption that a gameworld can be understood as an existential and aesthetic environment. While playing, the player makes attempts to understand her own perceptual situatedness within this gameworld and towards the avatar. This situatedness needs to be experienced in order to establish a ground for reflection. In consequence, it will enable one to distinguish characteristics of this in-game situatedness from the situatedness towards the everyday world, and towards artefacts considered from the point of view of the objectifying aesthetics; which does not, however, concur with the external perspective of the gameworld (Cf. Chapter 2.1). The meaning of the gameworld therefore emerges from the point of view of the individual within a gameworld.

The player's situation is complex, as it combines her situatedness in the everyday world towards the artefact; and in a gameworld, towards the avatar. Primarily, she concretises and synthesises her experiences with the gameworld, which are considered to be her environment and text, i.e. from both the internal and external perspectives. However, I argue that this complexity does not provide sufficient background for deduction from the situation within the gameworld about features of the artefact as abstracted from situatedness of the player.

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[3] For the existential concept of understanding, cf. Heidegger, 2001, 36-37. For the concept of situated knowledge, cf. Haraway, 1988.

The third part of the book — while building on theoretical arrangements made in the previous parts — is concentrated on existential, textual and contextual close playing of chosen digital games. In consequence, emphasis shifts from theoretical frameworks to a practical interpretation of games undertaken from an existential perspective.

Categories used by existential philosophers seem to be apt for describing the gameplay experience and reflecting upon its aesthetic. However, the application of this philosophical model needs to be understood in the light of strong or weak interpretation of games rather than knowledge. In consequence, the classical philosophical notions also used by existentialists need modification and extending, as well as rejuvenation — that is often connected with stripping the dramatic and ethical overtones from them. At stake is their operational/functional usefulness that makes them efficient tools for the interpretation of computer games[4].

 Let me move on to illustrating the core parts of the book in more detail.

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The first part of the book is devoted to an analysis of the making of digital artefacts from the perspective of the discourses, and the understanding of design processes emerging from practices of authors claiming creative independence of their work (Garda, Grabarczyk 2016). In the outlined framework, the artefact is defined as related to the author's existential project. This unique bond emerges in the course of a design process, and is co-shaped by critical and creative references to conventions as they are reinterpreted in the process of creation.

What, then, is the major motivation of the creators of authorial digital games as expressed in the paratexts they create? In what terms do they describe their own situatedness towards created artefacts[5]?

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[4] Even existentialism itself when applied to games is referred to as *ludoexistentialism* (Möring 2016) or *existential ludology* (Leino and Möring 2015a, 2015b).

[5] I do not make reference to notions of *authorial intent fallacy* (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, Barthes 1978, Farrell 2017) nor *designer fallacy* (Leino 2010, 2012, Ihde 2008), because I do not claim that

While asking such questions, one can hesitate; are the creators' comments on their own activities reflections, or rather a subtle form of marketing? Are they independent or based on prevailing trends?

In order to avoid meditations over intentional fallacies, influences and dependencies, imitativeness and primacy, I have decided to focus on the *discourses of digital game design.* I believe that these discourses gradually surface from individual creative practice in the process of reinterpretation of the existing cultural environment, and mirror how the author reflects over her own situatedness towards her activity, and the world she is situated in. However, their tractable presence is not dependent on real motivations or preferences of particular game creators, but relies on the interpretation of cultural texts authored by them — games, interviews, papers and manifestos, as well as theoretical works. My goal, however, is not to provide a comprehensive overview, but a sketch of three perspectives; the most significant of which features the connection between the author and the designed artefact. Each of them defines the character of an emerging artefact in a different manner. I would like to point out that the discussed discourses are unconventional approaches, when compared to the dominant discourse in game design which highlights the importance of specialised teamwork and replicable results (Cf. Rogers 2010; Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Zimmerman 2003, amongst others).

The criterion for distinguishing the particular discourse is then the answer to the following questions: what is the creator doing; what do her activities give shape to?

At this point, I would like to mention the discourse popular amongst the practitioners that places the goal of the design process not in the artefact, but in qualities of the players' experience, e.g. fun (Cf. Calleja 2011, 51–52; Koster 2004) or learning (Gee 2003, 2008). I will not discuss it in the following pages as they do not feature the author, but rather emphasise the final impact the artefact is expected to have on the player. On the other

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one can "read the meaning" or "guess the correct interpretation" of the particular artefact from the authors' paratexts. I will explore authorial discourses addressing their own creative practices, not the influence they could possibly have on players.

hand, in the discourses presented in the first part of the book, the artefact is considered to be the text; an expression of the vision, the argument, or the crafted object; i.e. the concrete proposition of making meaningful the world projected by the text. In consequence, its intended shape and meaning cannot be omitted while discussing the situatedness of the author.

The artefact is then a border; on one hand it is described by the discourse of game design, and the game designers' situatedness towards their own work; while on the other, it is defined by the player's experiences with it. However, I will not take stance on the linkage between the two poles of the authorial existential project, intentions and activities, connections – or lack of them – between the prospected and actual shape of the artefact as seen by the author, and the influence of the artefact on the players.

The discourses I will outline are connected by considering the result of the creative process as an *artefact*. I will not, however, pay attention to the know-how hints, i.e. technical knowledge of the game creators. On the contrary, I will concentrate on reflecting on how the design goals are set, and what they mean for the creators — do they want to express themselves, create a work of art, or critically comment on the contemporary world?

In order to isolate the discussed discourses, I will analyse the manifestos of designers who create in a similar manner, comments of the practitioners, as well as theorists of game design. As long as I question whether these perspectives are mutually exclusive, the distinction will enable me to focus on the interesting differences between them, and reflect over the role of the discursive horizon of the creation of games.

In the coming three chapters, I will outline three selected discourses of design. Despite it not being enough to exhaust the subject, I believe that the selection sufficiently shows how differently the role of the artefact is modelled in the distinct approaches; how the position of the designer towards the artefact is perceived; and what the priorities and consequences of such an approach are.

Throughout the first discourse — that of the *digital artisans* — the making of games is a handicraft, a form of manual labour that interweaves the artefact with the existential project of the creator; as it serves self-expression, or even

the transformation of the author's self.

The second perspective — of the *guardians of the vision* -— the activity of authoring digital games is understood as analogical to the romantic approach towards artistic creation. It is the discourse of *poiesis*, where the key role is played by the creation of the artefact convergent with the authorial proposition of making meaningful the world projected by the artefact..

In the third discourse, making a game is considered to be a form of critical activism. The discourse of the *digital orators* positions the procedural argumentation as the *clue* of their creative endeavours; they create simulations in order to critically comment on reality.

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The goal of the second part of the book is to elaborate on the three-levelled situatedness of the player towards the game, and propose concepts of a *gameplay situation* and an *aesthetic situation* that co-create the *internal perspective* experienced by the player, as differentiated from the *external perspective*, which complements the aesthetic understanding of the game. I will make an attempt to characterise the multidimensional character of the player's involvement in the game.

From the perspective internal to the gameworld, the first level of involvement is experienced as the *gameplay situation*. It is established by the interplay of the player's situatedness, and agency within the gameworld. From the in-game perspective, it can be described as a result of the cooperation between the self-avatar and the gameworld, or a realisation of the existential project of a *self-avatar*.

The crucial notion of the *self-avatar* needs to be introduced here. I use the compound as it clearly expresses that the player's perspective and situatedness within the gameworld cannot be experienced as separate from the avatar. The relation between the two elements can occur as both transparent and natural, or as strange and awkward. In both cases, the self-avatar is an emergent being situated within the gameworld; consisting of the player's existence and intentional acts, as well as the features of the avatar.

I believe that it is not only the 'I' of the player who perceives the avatar to be her glove (Dovey, Kennedy 2011), puppet (Westecott 2003), cursor (Fullerton 2008), character (Murray 1997), telepresence (Klevjer 2012), or even the Other (Vella 2014). I will argue that the self-avatar can be also be discussed in terms of the impersonation of in-game the *They*, because the player acts in the gameworld within the perceptual, spatiotemporal and causal framework defined by capabilities of the avatar. In other words, within this gameworld "*proximally*, it is not 'I', in the sense of *my own* Self, that 'am', but rather the Others, whose way is that of the '*they*'" that shape meaning of my in-game situatedness (Heidegger 2001, 167 [129]).

The second level of the player's involvement in the gameworld is an *aesthetic situation* that reveals dualism within the relation of the self-avatar to themselves. It is defined as a special type of reflective situation established by the appropriacy of the gameworld and the self-avatar, when they can consider themselves reflectively as a subject within the gameworld; and as a specific kind of aesthetic object that is *concretized* (Ingarden 1981, 175), due to their own intentional acts that reflectively embrace their situatedness within the gameworld.

Of equal importance is the third level of involvement with the computer game, which reveals coexistence and interplay between the gameworld and the game approached as text. The position experienced as the self-avatar from within the gameworld is perceived as a construction of the protagonist *distanced* from the player's subjectivity while approached from the external point of view. In consequence, when the player approaches the game from the external perspective, the avatar becomes its meaningful and personal part.

I will highlight the philosophical dimension of the threefold scheme outlined above, and name it *involved aesthetics*, as it is based on experiences of the being situated within the gameworld, and highlights the importance of the interplay between the internal and the external perspective. The internal perspective is based on experiencing the situatedness of the pre-reflective and reflective being-in-the-gameworld (Cf. Sartre, 1978, 74; Vella 2015, 55); while the external perspective is a situation of reflection over a text of a game, where the avatar is the central point recognised by the player while playing a game.

In the first chapter, I will concentrate on the difference between the approach of objectifying the game while considering the text from the external perspective, and ascribing the features recognised while playing the game to the artefact; and the existential, phenomenological approach that is based on the internal perspective - the first-hand experience of subjective situatedness within the gameworld.

The two consecutive chapters elaborate on the *internal perspective*, and develop an assumption of dual perspective within the gameworld, as it is experienced from the point of view of the *gameplay situation* and the *aesthetic situation*. In both cases, the object of research is the situatedness of the self within the gameworld.

The fourth and fifth chapters concentrate on the conditions of experience within the *gameplay situation* as seen from the point of view of the existentially-approached *aesthetic situation*. I will argue that as long as the player approaches the game from the external perspective, they can freely interpret it, and accept or reject the situatedness offered to them; but when the individual experiences an *adventure* (Sartre 2007, 36–37) as self-avatar within the gameworld; i.e. from the internal perspective; she acts in *bad faith* (See: Sartre 1978, 44–45, 47–70, 628; Leino 2012a) and/or in the *spirit of seriousness* (Sartre 1978, 39, 580, 626–27, 633). The argument will be supported by an analysis of *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015), *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014), *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009), and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012).

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Computer games create unique opportunities to experience philosophical problems through active participation. In this part of the book, I will argue that their most interesting moments occur due to the interplay between multiple perspectives, opened by the complexity of the player's situatedness towards the game, the avatar, and the gameworld.

The situations described in the second part of the book develop collaterally and influence each other. I believe that these, sometimes conflicting points

of view, are what shape a more comprehensive understanding of the particular game.

I will hereby concentrate on close playing and building a *philosophical* interpretation of chosen games. Each of these games features an avatar, and falls within the category of *independent* or *art* games, but is quite different in many respects. In this approach, the game is not considered to be material for analysis; on the contrary, playing is considered to be a method of philosophical inquiry revealing the existential condition, as well as exposing an aesthetic dimension of the game.

The self-avatar — as looked *through* rather than looking *at* — acts as specific lenses which enable the player to participate in the gameplay situation. When considered from the point of view of the aesthetic situation, the self-avatar is reflectively perceived as a structure of the in-game — the *They*. While the player considers the game from the external point of view, the avatar is referred to as a character, or as a well-known personal object.

Problems and questions lived through from the in-game perspective gain individuality as they are personally experienced. The interplay of agency of the self-avatar positioned within the gameworld - along with her aesthetic reflection - open the field for perspectivism, as it encourages the self-avatar to exercise multiple points of view; while the external situation, supported by the player's game literacy, provides her with the necessary interpretative tools.

I will focus on games that make problematic - and consequently more explicit – the passages between these perspectives.

The first chapter of the third part of the book highlights an effect of *reflective repetition* within the gameworld of *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013). Suggesting that the self-avatar participates in multiple games, the game itself is concentrated on the problematisation of the player's position within the gameworld, making the gameness of the experience explicit.

The second chapter focuses on the close playing of games featuring the *dissonance* emerging between a subjective position of the self-avatar,

and the possibilities offered by the gameworld. I argue that some features of the aesthetics of the absurd are traceable in non-absurd gameworlds.

The third and final chapter contains the close reading of *Sunset* (Tale of Tales 2015), and concentrates on the moments of passages, when the player *distances* herself from the in-game the *They,* and perceives the character from the external perspective.

Part 1. Discourses of Design

1.1. The Digital Tapestry. The Artisan and her Craft[1]

"All ideas of this kind are founded upon two mistaken suppositions: the first, that one man's thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man's hands; the second, that manual labor is a degradation, when it is governed by intellect" (Ruskin 1911, 2:169)

— roared John Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*. As the enemy of degradation of craft, industrialisation, and work specialisation, he argued that the originator of any form of creation is the person most predisposed to producing an artefact he intends.

In the course of describing the Heideggerian concept of *craft of thinking* – Maria Kostyszak asks in a similar vein:

"What is specific to the craft under scrutiny? Primarily, the relation of appropriateness, reciprocity between this what is thought about, and this what is thinking. [...] We are capable of doing only what we are keen on, and what fosters us, and we foster it"[2].

Some echoes of beliefs in this intimate appropriacy of design and development can be found in statements of *game makers*; both in professional authors of *indie* and experimental games (Ruffino 2015; Swirsky and Pajot 2012; Barr 2016; Gualeni 2013), and in amateurs descending from *Do-It-Yourself (DIY)* and *The Makers* movements (Anthropy 2012; Anthropy 2013; Anderson 2012; Dougherty 2012).

In the following pages, I will discuss concerns central to the discourse of the *digital artisans*, and accent its cohesion despite differing opinions among its exponents. I will use the notion of *digital artisans* to address individuals involved in game production who position their own game-making activity in categories of artisanry and craft. However, the leitmotif of the present chapter, as well as of the two following it, is an attempt to outline the discourse of *digital artisans*, not to research any specific sociocultural group. Within this dicourse, the creation of computer games is understood

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter was published in Polish (Kania 2016).

[2] (Kostyszak, 2010, 78). Quotation translated by author. See also Kostyszak, 1997.

as a craft or satisfying work (Westecott 2012; Bratich 2010; Guevara-Villalobos 2011; Ruffino 2013). It is performed solo or in a small team. Specialisation — which is common in industrial production — is severely limited or even absent in the practice of digital artisanry. In consequence, the authors take control and responsibility for the whole process of making the artefact; from the first sketches to the eventual market release. This feature makes their discourse very different from the one dominant in game industry, which features highly specialised production methods (Cf. Rogers 2010; Salen and Zimmerman 2003).

Within the discourse of the *digital artisans,* the making of computer games is understood and evaluated by reference to handicraft. Despite the digital nature of the works it addresses, this approach bears a striking resemblance to the approach presented by members of *The Arts and Crafts Movement,* funded by Walter Crane and Charles Robert Ashbee (Ashbee 1901). As will be discussed later on, the *craft* is here differentiated both from *industry* and *game industry*; as well as from specialised activities of game development and design (Resp. Morris 2011; Ruskin 1911; Anthropy 2012).

The motives unifying the discussed discourse are a strong conviction of the great value of digital artisanry; of a special bond that connects the author and her artefact; and of a threat posed by the emerging artefact[3]. Therefore, this approach to *making* digital games could find its mythical origin in the tale of Arachne — a great weaver transmogrified into a spider.

The contemporary Arachne — the weaver of digital matter — is inextricably bound to her creation. She believes that she weaves herself into her game, or that she transforms herself by making it. Due to her artistry and engagement, which constitute the uniqueness of the creative process, the artefact become a personal item. Despite its potentially infinite digital reproductibility (Cf. Baudrillard 1995, Benjamin 2010) it remains meaningful, inimitable, and created on one's own (Bachelard 1996, 124). The tapestry, as it expresses the perspective of Arachne, exposes the author. As a result of the philosophical exploration of the order she is subjected to, it becomes a material form of

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[3] I discuss the presented approaches in order to provide an overview of a general discourse. Therefore, I will not isolate the perspectives of separate groups, environments, nor the particular artisans.

the critical statement.

Restoring the Value of Artisanry

Although it is hard to imagine this today, up to the middle of the nineteenth century everything was made by hand. When mass production expanded, craftwork was subsequently devalued. In many areas of life, artisanry seemed to become obsolete. Almost effortlessly produced items were easily replaceable. Therefore, traditional manufacturing — as well as repairing and tweaking old devices — started to demand a reason other than necessity. Therefore, the need for a new perspective has been raised; the need for a discourse which would make artisanry necessary again, but in a different way.

In the age of industrialisation, the British *Arts and Crafts Movement* emerged as an answer to this need. Inspired by the ideas of Ruskin and Morris, the movement was formed to protect craftsmanship and craftsmen (Ruskin 1911; Ruskin 2004; Morris 1888). While manifesting the nostalgia for the pre-industrial world, "[I]t grew out of a concern for the effects of industrialisation: on design, on traditional skills and on the lives of ordinary people" (Victoria and Albert Museum 2011). Among postulates of the *Arts and Crafts Movement* was fostering *mastery* in craftsmanship; as well as maintaining and spreading the conviction that handmade items distributed in smaller scale, for e.g. tapestries manufactured by Morris — as opposed to mass-produced ones — possess the unique inherent value.

The fundamentals of the discourse of *digital artisans* consist of similar needs and concerns. It expresses the strong belief in the value of digital items created outside the mainstream of the game industry, as well as trust in their distinctness, and a peculiar fragility, which results in the need for adequate care. While contrasting the optimised process of game production with *making games*, the discourse is concentrated on *the act of creation* of the artefact as a whole; the code, audiovisuals, and narrative considered to be equally important parts of it; marked with the specific approach, a metaphorical fingerprint of its author; which underlines the conviction that "the act of making puts a small piece of you in the object" (Hatch 2013).

Creative Joy

The presented way of thinking about craftsmanship can be tracked in the statements of the *digital artisans* connected with the *DIY* and *The Makers* movements. Dale Dougherty is the founder of *MAKE* magazine, and initiator of the Maker Faire (Dougherty 2012, 11) - the biggest *DIY* festival. He proposes a justification for a special value associated with the processual dimension of creation: it is accompanied by a specific kind of *joy*.

This special feeling is aroused by the widely understood concept of working with matter. Therefore, the motivation of digital artisans is not a result they aim to achieve, but skilful execution of their creative activities. It represents an understanding of craft as play; in the sense of an activity undertakaen for its own sake rather than for an extrinsic purpose or final production. Dougherty asserts that;

"[W]hile people today may not treasure this ability out of the same sense of necessity as they once did, they are finding their lives enriched by creating something new and learning new skills" (Dougherty 2012, 11).

Independently from the proficiency of the craftsman, the process is oriented in playful and spontaneous experimenting with the material, "the excitement of making things" (Dougherty 2012, 11). Making and exploration of the matter are primarily considered to be sources of pleasure, realisation of personal passion, as well as the key to understanding the secrets of the formed material.

Therefore, besides the value of the unique creative process, the joy of making and the pleasure of work are all traits of the discourse of the *digital artisans*.

The Master of Imperfection

In the discussed discourse, two values co-occur: the first is the *joy* of spontaneous, personal creative practice as discussed above (Cf. Buckle 2017, Extra Credits 2017, theguywiththelemon 2017); while the second is the *pursuit of excellent results* (Cf. Swirsky and Pajot 2012). At first, it seems that the two values are

directed at opposing directions; the former aids improvisation and unplanned experiments which can be enjoyed independently of the technical level of the artisan, while the latter features the arduous cultivation of professional skills of the *digital artisan.*

In order to disentangle this apparent paradox, I will elaborate on the issue of *mastery*. According to *The Arts and Crafts Movement* manifestos, the excellence of execution is the measure of its value, while the *joy*, which accompanies the process of creation, is important as far as it is reflected in the artefact. However, here *excellence* is not synonymous with *perfection of finish*, which can be found in works of highly-trained journeymen which anyhow lack panache. The sign of excellence is rather the pursuit for great quality that is accompanied by consistency of design with its execution.

This understanding of the excellence is also reflected in formulations of the *digital artisans*. The search for quality — accompanied by acceptance of the imperfection of games — is accented by Michaël Samyn from *Tale of Tales.* When reminiscing about their work on *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009), he wrote in his blog:

"Personally we don't mind some things being broken in our games. For us, it adds to their charm and even their believability as synthetic beings and locations. But it was never our goal. We would prefer things to be perfect" (Samyn 2015).

As Jesper Juul points out, the ostensible imperfection of digital artefacts created by independent authors is often supported by the high professional skills acquired during their practice within the game industry, or during the long training motivated by the personal aspiration. He also uses the paradox of the *excellence in imperfection* to characterise what he calls "the Independent Style" (Juul 2014) represented by authors of narrowly understood *indie games* who had celebrated their glory in 2011-2012[4]. The style is characterised

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[4] For definitions and discussions about relations between independent and indie games cf. Garda and Grabarczyk 2017, Simon 2013, Zimmerman 2002, amongst others. Here, my general point of interest are authors of games that was "creative independence" by Garda and Grabarczyk (2017), including *indie* authors representing certain social, cultural and artistic formation, as long as their work is creatively independent.

by apparent simplicity and retro stylisation, which often requires substantial skills and is argued to evoke nostalgia for a past which never existed (Juul 2014).

In the opening minutes of a documentary on the community of professional *indie* authors entitled "Indie game: the Movie" (Swirsky and Pajot 2012) Phil Fish, the author of *FEZ* (2012), describes his games as artefacts valuable due to their imperfection. He explains, that "[T]hings that are personal... have flaws. They have vulnerabilities" (Swirsky and Pajot 2012). His words echo Ruskin's formulation from *The Stones of Venice* (Ruskin 1911, 2:169–70), as he states that "it seems a fantastic paradox, but it is nevertheless a most important truth, that no architecture can be truly noble which is not imperfect" (Ruskin 1911, 2:170).

In the documentary mentioned above, Fish elaborates on his struggle with matter, on learning game development, on many attempts and remakes of graphics of *FEZ*. He made many attempts to refine the same elements of the game; reiterated, improved, and revised ad infinitum; because in his opinion, the previous versions always rendered much worse than the most current rendition (Swirsky and Pajot 2012). This fond approach to personally created artefact is then accompanied with a strong pursuit for perfection. This extremist approach is closer to the idea of the master shaped by the *Arts and Crafts Movement,* than to hobbyists satisfied by the tiniest successes. According to Ruskin, such a master would claim: "we have not reached the perfection we can imagine, and cannot rest in the condition we have attained" (Ruskin 1911, 2:181). Does it mean that the discourse of the *digital artisans* depreciates, just like non-professional artefacts which are not masterpieces?

Sharing with the Authentic Maker

In the artefacts created by the novice *digital artisans*, imperfection, amateurism, and simplicity do not, naturally, concur to the distinctness of personal style. However, the value of these works — apart from the creative *joy* of their creators — lays in their expressive and auto-expressive dimension. As Ruskin argues; "to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion,

to paralyse vitality" (Ruskin 1911, 2:172). He underlines that imperfection characterises not only masterpieces, but is also valuable as a feature of works of less advanced craftsmen. While for the professional *indie* authors, *making games* "becomes a place where developers can demonstrate their technical skills and their perfected craft" (Juul 2014), the more democratic representants of the *digital artisans* "emphasize[s] participation and personality rather than skill" (Juul 2014).

Vibrancy, spontaneity, and participation in the creative community are central values within the discourse of the *digital artisans.* According to Emma Westecott, the non-professional authors of playable artefact "address[es] the democratization of craft more generally as a personal praxis" (Westecott 2012, 81). In consequence, they value the process, commonness, engagement, and free access to all tools necessary for their amateur experiments. Moreover, the manifesto of *The Makers* includes a commandment, which dictates that as a Maker "[Y]ou cannot make and not share" (Hatch 2013, 1). In comparison with the stance of professional *indie* authors, the accent is then displaced to cooperation and expression adjusted to the level of skills of the artisans, dissemination of tools and knowledge, as well as sharing results of work.

The discourse of the *digital artisans* — both hobbyists and masters — is then connected by the need of the developing skills of craftsmen; personal efforts put in the work on artefacts; and by the appreciation of *joy* stemming from the "experience of day-to-day engagement with technology" (Westecott 2012, 80), as Westecott puts it. Furthermore, the discourse is also joined by the attitude to the industry.

The Workshop after the Second Revolution

The industry changed significantly between the age of the industrial revolution — when it was criticised by the *Arts and Crafts Movement* — and the contemporaneity of the *digital artisans.* For advocates of craftsmanship of the nineteenth century, the spheres of manual work and industry were at opposite poles. At the time, the industry was identified by the replication of conventional solutions and power structures restricting creativity.

On the other hand, the core discourse of the *digital artisans* is established by statements made by members of *The Makers* movement, which is also called "The New Industrial Revolution" (Cf. Anderson 2012; Aliverti, et al. 2015; Johnston 2015).

The second Revolution was undertaken in order to connect the areas polarised by the first one; i.e. to restore the value of personal engagement of the creator to the technologically crafted items. The *digital artisans*, who create computer games, are using high-tech tools and mass-produced components. Moreover, if they succeed, they establish businesses and start their own production.

In this case, the opposition between the industry and artisanry is revealed in slightly different areas. Primarily, the word *industry* refers to methods of work, financial systems, and schemes of distribution of the particular artefacts. The *digital artisan* is minimising specialisation, in exchange for control and responsibility for the whole process of making the artefact. In the most extreme cases, the game is made and released by only one person. Lindsay Grace calls it "truly independent development" (Grace, 2009) or "independent independent" (Grace 2009). The *digital artisans* are not discredited, neither by using well-known, conventional technological solutions in order to create new artefacts, nor by massive distribution of their works. Moreover, the latter is often perceived as one of the most visible factors of success.

Nevertheless, the *digital artisans* talk about their work in a very similar manner as their non-digital precursors did. They contrast the uniqueness of the creative process of the games handcrafted in digital matter, with mass production of process and results of the game industry. As Jesper Juul points out, among the independent authors, the "commercialism of both big budget and casual games is met by a counter-image of small, cheaply developed, more personal and experimental games" (Juul 2014).

Uniquely Bound

John Ruskin argued that:

"…one man's thoughts can never be expressed by another: and the difference between the spirit of touch of the man who is inventing, and of the man who is obeying directions, is often all the difference between a great and a common work of art" (Ruskin 1911, 2:169).

A similar — but often less radical — understanding of making games is present in the discourse of the *digital artisans*. The uniqueness of the playable artefact is here determined by the process of creation, which establishes a relationship between the author and her creation founded by sole, manual work. In other words, nobody else is situated towards the particular artefact as its author is (Borges 1999). The discourse is hence not only binding the status of the artefact and the creative process, but also the figure of the creator and her attitude towards the performed activities. Therefore, I will once more refer to the character of the proud weaver from Greek mythology; her story will enable me to expose two understandings of the meaning of work over the artefact, in the perspective of the contemporary *digital artisans*; namely, as a struggle for *self-expression*, or a struggle for *self-transformation*.

Expression of the Self

"A video game is the most effective way I can express myself" (Swirsky and Pajot 2012), says Tommy — the co-author of *Super Meat Boy*. Conviction of the importance of auto-expressive potential of the digital craft can be found also in utterances of Anna Anthropy (Anthropy 2012; Anthropy 2013), *Tale of Tales* (Samyn 2015; Harvey and Samyn 2006) and Phil Fish (Swirsky and Pajot 2012), among others[5]. It is also discernible in theoretical texts by Jack Bratich, who writes about "*immaterial labour"* (Bratich 2010, 304), and Emma Westecott who argues that "every artifact made by human hand expresses the values of its maker" (Westecott 2012, 83). In consequence, it reveals the existential situatedness of its author, and communicates her perspective.

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[5] I will not elaborate on the auto-therapeutical role ascribed to games by authors of games; such as Minority Studios 2012, Numinous Games 2016, amongst others.

The myth of Arachne also seems to highlight the importance of self-expression. The weaver strives to enclose in the tapestry her own point of view, and the way she experiences the world. Nancy K. Miller uses this moment of the myth to create her own "arachnologies" (Cf. Miller 1986). Her concept clashes with Barthes' on the death of the author, and his disappearance from the text (Barthes 1978). According to Miller, the author does not disappear in the textual fabric she weaves; rather, she interweaves herself and her story with the text. Both in arachnologies and in the discourse of the *digital artisans*, the author is defined by the text. The maker is defined by the artefact, just like the shape of the tapestry determines the fate of Arachne.

However, *self-expression* in the form of the game is not a romantic sign of the author's visionary individuality (Cf. Chapter 2.1). The voice of the *digital artisan* is rather critical, hard-hitting, or self-referential, as it concerns her own situation within the world. This feature is the next common point of the discussed discourse with Ruskin's ideas, as he strongly accented the connection between aesthetics and ethics. In consequence, his social ideas were mirrored in the way he thought of the arts and artisanry.

Additionally, Westecott not only claims that it is a general rule that the artefact always depicts values; but also points out which values are generated in the process of game-making. According to her, the;

"…potential values of DIY game making include a sense of agency, identity, involvement, and affect on behalf of the makers and the communities they generate" (Westecott 2012, 86).

The notion of *craft* in her approach is narrowed down and assigned to the sphere of women's work (Westecott 2012, 78–80; Westecott, Epstein, and Leitch 2013). The digital craft is here intended to be a medium for feminist, critical creation. It is also connected with the self-expression of individuals acting outside the cultural mainstream, who use shared tools to signalise their problems while being "the sole creators" (Westecott 2012, 82).

The best known examples of using games as a medium for expressing personal experiences are artefacts made by Anna Anthropy, and her commentary for *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012b) and *Mighty Jill Off* (Anthropy 2008). Longing for

self-expression is the major motivation behind her creative projects. Moreover, Anthropy points at the concrete lack she perceives in the world. As a result, the absence of games linked to the topic of transsexuality became the key motivation of her work:

"I have to strain to find any game […] that resembles my own experience […] And almost none of these games are about me, or anyone like me" (Anthropy 2012).

While getting closer to the issue of *self-transformation* by manual labour, I would like to single out the game *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012b). It is described as an attempt to communicate an experience of sex change, in a form of playable artefact. Interestingly, Anthropy seems to overlook the self-transformative potential of the work in digital matter. In consequence, she comprehends the game as a medium of expression and presentation of her experiences, rather than a tool enabling to look reflectively — from the point of view of a different person or environment — at where her own transformation takes place.

The Transformation

The thread of *self-transformation*[6] will also be accompanied by the mythical weaver, as its main assumption is that of inseparability, and the mutual influences of intellectual and manual work. While reckoning on the state of the world she lives in, Arachne changed her situatedness towards it. From a master of weaving, she transforms into a critic of the existing order.

This is the only feature of the discourse of the *digital artisans*, which I was not able to find in the understanding of artisanry inherited from *The Arts and Crafts Movement*. The concepts of interdependence of the creative processes of the artefact, and the transformation of subjectivity of the artisan are formulated by Peter Dormer in his book titled *The Culture of Craft*. He claims that artisanry "is inevitably an activity of self-exploration in the sense that

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[6] I would like to underline that while reflecting over the self-transformative potential of making of computer games, I do not mean their influence on the players. By discussing the discourse of the *digital artisans*, I elaborate on the relation between the artefacts and their creators.

one learns about oneself through searching for excellence in work" (Dormer 1997, 219).

The most radical stance is presented by Phil Fish, while describing his attitude to his authorial game, *FEZ*:

"And it's not just a game. I'm so closely attached to it. It's me. It's my Ego, my perception of myselfis at risk. This is my identity: *FEZ*. I'm guy making *FEZ*" (Swirsky and Pajot 2012).

Nevertheless, more balanced self-transformative perspectives can be found in the work of other game authors (McGonigal 2011) and scholars; with an interesting theoretical interpretation of the transformative and cognitive role of the manual work presented by Stefano Gualeni. He calls authors of games *crafters* (Gualeni 2015, xiv, 1-2), and underlines the importance of the "auto-gnostic aspect of how human beings extend and objectify themselves, their ideas, and their desires in technical artifacts" (Gualeni 2015, 73).

Gualeni argues that the critical and philosophical potential of virtual worlds, including computer games, is enclosed in their power to challenge the worldviews of people by providing them with different phenomenologies. Making games, however, also has power as a personal — and potentially self-transformative — practice of the author. Gualeni asks in his book:

"Is the creation of a literary piece or a philosophical treatise, thus, as changing an experience for the writer as it is for the reader? And, […] are the designers of virtual worlds and simulated experiences going through a process of self-transformation while engaged in the process of designing their technologies and technological content?" (Gualeni 2015, 75).

He then answers these questions affirmatively, and proposes the interpretation of making playable artefacts in terms of the Foucaltian "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988). This technologies are practices "that assist[s] individuals in objectifying and transforming themselves and their relationship to the world" (Gualeni 2015, xv). Therefore, according to Gualeni; "any technological design also contributes to shaping the subjectivity of its designers" (Gualeni 2015, xvi).

I believe that the self-transformative process taking place when the game is created can also be discussed in terms of existential philosophy. The emerging artefact becomes a part of the author's existential project, as the creative work influences her perspective on her own activity, and her self as creator of the meaningful item.

While comparing the *self-expressive* and the *self-transformative* stances in the discourse of the *digital artisans*, the questions of authorship and of underlying concepts of subjectivity become theoretically interesting, as the two views of subjectivity appear to be contradictory. In the self-transformative formula, the author becomes "dynamised"; she is subjected to the transformative power of her own activity. The subjectivity is then approached in a manner similar to that of the existential philosophers, where the projective nature of the human being results in an assertion that it can be, or rather must be, shaped by its own activities. Oppositely, in the self-expressive formula, the role of the artisan is rather defined by the constant elements of her situatedness; i.e. her position in the social order, towards which she tries to take a stance. The creative endeavour is also an expression of her "self"; the authentic utterance. In consequence, the self-expressive stance assumes the authorial subjectivity to be a constant landscape that can be expressed by creating computer games. Nevertheless, in both cases the creative perspective is outlined by the need for personal expression in the vein of *DIY*, and the process of building the relationship between the maker and the authored game, rather than the sole form of the artefact.

Criticism

Conceiving the making of games in categories of the *digital artisanry* renders every single artefact *unique* due to the unrepeatable creative process that led to its inception. However, the digital nature of the artefact "in the age of digital reproduction" (Davis 1995, cf. Benjamin 2010) makes this uniqueness problematic. On one hand, the creative process and its result are unrepeatable when considered to be parts of the author's existential project, while on the other hand, playable artefacts function rather in the *allographic* than *autographic regime* (Genette 1997). As long as there is no such thing as a unique physical artefact, and a material trace of the artisan, works

of *digital artisanry* are unique only in the weaker sense; similarly to a work of literature or music, i.e. analogically to the situation when "we do not recite (or print) a poem in general, but rather *this particular* poem [...and...] this state of affairs obtains in all the allographic arts" (Genette 1997, 16).

The second problem is the value of *replicable mastery*, which can easily replace the value of *novelty* in the discourse of the *digital artisans*. As long as the author is able to express herself within the existing framework of tools she has mastered; and still experience the creative *joy* when reconfiguring, readjusting, and polishing well-known solutions; there is no need for major innovations or far-reaching experiments with the *digital material*.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The discourse of the *digital artisans* originates from the British tradition of thinking about crafts and manual labour that emerged in the nineteenth century. Its separateness from the mainstream discourse of the digital games industry is expressed in the belief of the value of *uniqueness* and *creative joy*. While distinguishing between the artisanal work in the *digital matter* and the mainstream industry, it appraises the intimacy of both the author and the game, as the artefact is interwoven in its creator's existential endeavour. It also accents the value of *mastery,* and the importance of democratic access to tools encouraging amateurs to experiment. Within the discourse of the *digital artisans*, games are considered to be a form of self-expression, a means of self-determination, or even tools of self-transformation for the artisan struggling with digital matter.

1.2. The Playable Poetry. The Guardians of the Vision

"They do not speak, neither do they keep silent; it is something different"

(Sartre 1988, 29).

"Poets […] own, they are, what they become first in naming"

(Bloom 1973, 64).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet and theorist of romantic creation, believed that the manner of operation and power of the imagination are individual cases. As far as everyone is given a germ of imagination, only the chosen ones are able to use its possibilities according to their own will. They are the ones who can make their own experiences of the world not only meaningful, but also artistically formed.

The scope of the romantic imagination is even more pervasive than the power of the intellect, judgement or memory. As Mary Warnock points out:

"Imagination has to do more. It must try to create one thing (one thought or one form) out of the many different elements of experience; and this entails extracting the essence of the differing phenomena of experience" (Warnock 1978, 92; cf. Coleridge 1997, 175).

The essence of the imaginative experience can be named the *authorial vision*, which synthesises its heterogeneity. The imagination is then capable of ennobling the wholeness of the created artefact, as well as encapsulating its meaning in one symbol, emblem, or item.

The thread of the romantic imagination can be traced in utterances of game creators. It constitutes the key part of the discourse of the authors, who I will call the *guardians of the vision*. Within this perspective, the imagination is a power of extracting and clarifying the authorial, synthesising vision, as well as enclosing it in the digital *analogon* (Sartre 2004, 188–89). The imagination is the faculty that gives rise to the vision that emerges from the wholeness, as well as from every single element of the playable artefact.

Following the Vision

Coleridge argued that the imagination is able to work in all aspects of life, as it shapes the way human beings experience the world. According to his theory, the imagination is capable of "joining the picture and the idea, the concrete with abstract, emotions and power of judgement, spontaneity and reason" (Kowalczykowa 1975, 69). In other words, as Agata Bielik-Robson puts it, the romantic imagination is a power of "the inventive reception, creative power of vision, which connects the fortunate harmony of collection and subjective epiphany, *data* and *addenda*"[1].

However, how can one connect the power of the creative imagination with the actual work of art? And, analogically, how can the vision be translated into the playable artefact, and how can meaning be enclosed in the digital matter?

Gaston Bachelard; while explaining his poetics of reverie, and differentiating it from the poetics of poetry; warned that the realisation of the vision into the poem happens to be very long:

"In contrast to a dream a reverie cannot be recounted. To be communicated, it must be *written*, written with emotion and taste, being relived all the more strongly because it is being written down" (Bachelard 1971).

Sartre's formulations are also consistent with this understanding of the relation between vision and poetry. He writes that the latter — just the same as painting or sculpture — depends on images and sounds rather than on the meaning of words. It tunes the consciousness into the imaginative mode, turns it into irreality, and averts it from the world. In the poem, the word hence becomes a thing:

"The interrogation has become a thing as the anguish of Tintoretto became a yellow sky. It is no longer a meaning, but a substance" (Sartre 1988, 33).

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[1] Bielik-Robson 2010, 136. Quotation translated by author.

In consequence, the discourse of the *guardians of the vision* privileges a particular kind of playable artefact; the *poetic* or *lyric* type, as opposed to *epic* or *prose-like* ones. This distinction echoes the Sartrean dichotomy, as expressed in *What is Literature?* (1988):

"It is true that the prose-writer and the poet both write. But there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters. Otherwise, their universes are incommunicable, and what is good for one is not good for the other" (Sartre 1988, 34).

Analogically, *the playable poetry* can be considered a single but powerful imagining, enclosed in the form of a digital artefact that gradually unfolds aspects of the vision.

Analogon: The Nature of the Artefact

In order to describe the material of the creative process, Sartre uses the notion of *analogon* (Sartre 2004, 188–89)[2].

The term was coined in order to distinguish between the imaginary, intentional way of being of the artwork, which is irreality (Sartre 2004, 188), and its pre-digital material basis; the *analogon* enabling other people to perceive the artwork. In order to clarify the difference between the analogon and the image, Sartre gives an example of the painting that is spotlighted by the lamp located on the wall, next to the frame:

"…it is the canvas that is illuminated and not the object of aesthetic appreciation. In fact the painter did not *realize* a mental image at all, but simply constituted a material analogon such that anyone can grasp that image if only they gaze at the analogon. But the image thus provided with an external analogon remains an image. There is no realization of the imaginary, nor should one talk of its objectification" (Sartre 2004, 189).

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[2] Ingarden uses the term *objective existential foundation*, i.e. the material that constitutes the perceivable manifestation of the artwork, but is not its component; as opposed to the *subjective existential foundation*, i.e. creative activity of the artist (Cf. Ingarden 1981, 185–86).

I will argue that the difference between the precious authorial vision, that exists beyond the compass of reality, and its digital *analogon*, can be tracked in the discourse of the *guardians of the vision.*. In consequence, the activity of the *guardian of the vision* consists of directing the team constructing the *analogon* — the computer game with all its components — in order to make it as truthful to the vision as possible, to give it the power to evoke a certain imaginary synthesis; a meaningful world encapsulated in the artefact.

The Synthesis

While emphasising their belief in the creative power of the imagination and individuality of the author, the utterances of the *Tale of Tales*; that is, Auria Harvey and Michaël Samyn; inscribe themselves into the romantic and poetic discourse of the *guardians of the vision.* According to them, the crucial task of the designer is the creation of a consistent — albeit general — vision of the whole game. This is the vision that determines the place of the *heart* of the playable artefact; its "core activity" prepared for the player (Samyn 2008).

For example, in *The Graveyard*, the core activity is a walk through the cemetery (Tale of Tales 2008). The gameworld is in black and white, and this lack of colour adds the charm of the old movie or photography to the game.

(Tale of Tales 2008. Screenshot taken by the author)

The slow stroll amongst graves is the only activity, as the designers do not supply the player with any other tasks. Its goal is reaching the bench standing next to the chapel. Walking is evidently a hard task for the old avatar:

"You move her around but she walks very slowly. The camera is fixed to the avatar. No rotating, no zooming (re-enforcing the feeling of limited motion of an old body)" (Samyn 2008).

The simplicity and context of this core activity makes this experience remarkable. As Samyn writes in the post-mortem of the game:

"This simple activity is made meaningful by defining the avatar and the environment. A deer in a forest. An old lady in a graveyard. Both immediately imply meaning" (Samyn 2008).

The meaning implied by the game is ascribed to the presence of the authorial vision, which synthesises multiple elements into one wholeness; while the goal of the design process is, according to the *guardians of the vision*, a creation of the *total experience*;

"All elements serve the realisation of the piece as a whole. […] It's not about the individual elements but about the total effect of the environment. The sum of its parts" (Harvey and Samyn 2006).

This total experience is sought by extending the *core activity* only with necessary elements — with nothing that could sway the player from the unifying vision. Analogically to the human being; who makes her existence meaningful in the course of her life by making her existential project concise; the *guardian of the vision* attempts to make the artefact present the world as focused on a single perception of her invention.

Chasing the Emblem

Fumito Ueda outlines the perspective which is the most explicitly authorial and concentrated of visions (Team Ico 2001; Team Ico 2005; Team Ico 2016). The common feature of discourses of romanticism and Ueda's — as well as *Tale of Tales'* — is attaching the great significance to the determination in following the authorial vision.

According to Ueda, the vision can be expressed in one image called the "crucial visual emblem" (Ueda and Kaido 2004). This emblem is a point of reference for the entire designed artefact. For example, the game *ICO* (Team Ico 2001), was accompanied by the emblem expressing the universal theme of 'boy meets girl'. The *leitmotif* was illustrated by the portrait of two running teenagers holding hands, and constitutes a crucial part of the gameplay. Ueda claims that during the course of creating the game, "the original concept remains almost unchanged" (Ueda and Kaido 2004).

(Cover art of *Ico* drawn by Ueda. Source: http://teamico.wikia.com/wiki/Ico)

Furthermore, Ueda's approach to the process of transition from the vision to the final artefact is worth mentioning. He explains that the creation consists of choosing from many excessive elements created by the team. This strategy resembles the anecdote concerning Michelangelo Buonarroti, who sensed a figure of David enclosed in the block of marble. The Renaissance artist wrote in his letter to Benedetto Varchi that "[T]he sculptor arrives at his end by taking away what is superfluous" (Duppa and De Quincy 1872). His role was to chip off the redundant fragments of stone:

"When he started, Michelangelo had almost mystic belief that the figure he carved already existed fully formed within the block of stone […]. By studying the raw marble, examining the patter, he could sense where the figure stand. Then layer by layer, blower by blower, after four year of hard labor, he liberated from this rocky prison his creation - the magnificent statue of David" (Anonymous 2017).

Therefore, the team working on Ueda's game prepares a digital "block of marble", and the *guardian of the vision* subtracts the unwanted chunks. A very high quality of work and the unique consistency of the artefact, which results in its "epic minimalism", is then obtained at the cost of its volume (Stuart 2015).

The method of creation described above is called "design by subtraction" (Kohler 2013; Stuart 2015; Ueda and Kaido 2004). The technique is intended to limit both functionality and the audiovisual effects used in the artefact, which could result in distracting the player's concentration on emotions evoked by the influence of the emblem that inspired the artefact. "Trimming away much of what had come to define action videogames in an effort to create something more artistically cohesive" (Kohler 2013), Ueda claims. What remains in power at the end of the subtractive process are these moments of the artefact, which depict the authorial vision in the most condensed way. Therefore, instead of making the gameworld represent the everyday world; which is absurd and contains a surplus of possibilities that can never be fully realised (Camus 1991); it offers a concrete composition with clear aesthetic form. Contrary to presenting technical fireworks, the artefact is characterised by consistency and a perfect finish.

The aim of the *guardians of the vision* is then to enclose in the artefact the archetypical experience — an emblem or activity. The French philosopher of science and phenomenologist of imagination, Gaston Bachelard, called this crucial element of the authorial vision "the flash of an image" or "the heart of the image" (Bachelard 1971, 153; Bachelard 1994, 111). He wrote that it is "an object which, all by itself, represents the world. The imagined detail is a sharp point which penetrates the dreamer; it excites in him a concrete meditation" (Bachelard 1971, 153).

I believe that in the poetics created by Bachelard; and equally in the discourse

of the *guardians of the vision*; following one picture, gesture, or idea that is intended to shape the gameworld becomes the central point and *leitmotif* of the whole project, which shapes the bond of the author and the artefact. From this point of view, the artefact is the form of *playable poetry*; and the creative act results in the object, which embodies the vision.

Who is the Poet?

The discourse of the *guardians of the vision* gives the author of the game the role of architect or director, conducting the team of performers. Brenda Brathwaite writes that,

"To see the game designer as an artist is then to see them as the Auteur in the tradition of film — the person who conceives of and oversees a team's execution of a vision" ('Game Designer as Artist' 2008).

The *guardian of the vision* is then keeping watch over the group executing her plans. However — in contrast with the *digital artisan*, who values her solo creation — she is not engaging directly with every aspect of the artefact.

The belief in the individual character of every imagination is the consecutive point, which connects the discussed discourse with the point of view represented by the romantic poets. For both of them, individualism is the key value. As Maurice Bowra points out:

"This belief in the imagination was part of the contemporary belief in the individual self. The poets were conscious of a wonderful capacity to create imaginary worlds, and they could not believe that this was idle or false. On the contrary, they thought that to curb it was to deny something vitally necessary to their whole being. They thought that it was just this which made them poets, and that in their exercise of it they could do far better than other poets who sacrificed it to caution and common sense" (Bowra 1961, 1–2).

The *guardian of the vision* is an unquestionable leader of her team due to the combination of the role of the director with the need for strong individuality. *Tale of Tales* declare; in their *Realtime Art Manifesto;* that game designers must be dictators who are able to single-mindedly pursue their goals (Harvey and

Samyn 2006). They advise a prospective *guardian of the vision* as follows: "Your work needs to come from a singular vision and be driven by a personal passion" (Harvey and Samyn 2006). The wise dictators let the other team members execute their part of the job. However, the director's sole assignment is the choice of the collaborators, as well as decisions pertaining to the final shape of the artefact.

The Form

Despite their strong individualities, authors of playable artefacts are not creating in a cultural vacuum. Their imagination — just as the imagination of poets, painters, or mystics — is situated, and in consequence, fulfilled with images that constitute the tradition they belong to. It means that the Christian mystic will not have visions riddled with the Buddhist symbolism (Cf. Scholem 1996). Analogically, the *guardian of the vision* works with a certain range of conventions, narrative solutions, audio-visual preferences, and variety of mechanics of the game. However, the creative part of the job is to *misimagine* them; i.e. to add the individual twist without breaking conventions (Cf. Bloom 1973; Kania 2014, 131).

According to Bachelard, the intrinsic element of the process of poetic imagining is the intention of describing the vision. Therefore, the poetic vision is already imagined in words; it is neither *put into* words, nor *represented* by them. The vision of the author of the playable artefact will then include the functionality of the artefact - not only its emotional or visual components.

How then does the discourse of the *guardians of the vision* present the way the individual imagining can be translated into the field of games; which is highly conventional, and divided into genres? The stances of Ueda and *Tale of Tales* differ at this point.

Clinamen

From the observations of Ueda, one can deduce that the new vision of the artefact is not emerging from the non-being. On the other hand,

it is an innovation which alters the conventions of the particular genre, or an illustrious variation on already-known motives. The optimal formula for the game is then "the slightest of twists from the standard format" (Ueda and Kaido 2004).

These "slightest of twists" are nothing else than *clinamen,* as used by Harold Bloom to describe the creative swerve from tradition. The term has its roots in the determinism of Leucippus and Democritus (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, § 539, 541, 545, 580); and evolved in Epicurus and Lucretius (Laertius 2011, X, 134; Lucretius 2012). However, for the ancient philosophers, *clinamen* was the incidental inflection of the course of its falling, which was the cause of all changes in the universe, while Bloom concentrated on the romantic understanding of the term which was proposed by Coleridge (Coleridge 1839, 142). This form of *clinamen* refers to the individuality and particularity of the human being (Bloom 2003, 200). Bloom himself proposed *clinamen* as the first sign of the creative personality, which causes the swerve from the traditional imagery, and leads — in a couple of hard steps — to the shaping of the independent, strong poet (Bloom 1973).

In this context, artistic creation is based on excellent literacy, which enables the creator to perform the "slightest of twists", *clinamen* or *misimagining* that will refer to existing conventions and, in consequence, will remain understandable for the perceivers. However, due to its originality, this creation will mark the tradition with its uniqueness.

The Artistic Revolution

Harvey and Samyn do not share Ueda's views on tradition. *Tale of Tales* opts for experimentation with real-time 3D game technology in order to break free from conventions. Despite addressing their creations to the players and calling them games — alternatively notgames[3] — they value a radical break from genres, and solutions preserved by the commercial game industry. While echoing manifestos of the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, *Tale of Tales*

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[3] Referred as 'not games' or 'notgames', as in the "make love, notgames" motto used in (Harvey and Samyn 2010).

criticises contemporary commercial games for conservatism; and modern and contemporary art for being "ironical, cynical, self-referential, afraid of beauty, afraid of meaning", etc. (Harvey and Samyn 2006). In their own manifesto, they proclaim the new art should break with the past and abandon conventions and genres, exactly like the surrealists and the futurists did before — paradoxically — by continuing the tradition of artistic manifestos initiated by the Romantics (Breton 1969; Marinetti 1973; Wordsworth 1969; Kania 2011).

In their later formulations, the *Tale of Tales* resign their revolutionary tone for the sake of agitating, for the recovery of aesthetic values, and means of expression specific to the pre-modernist arts. They proclaim: "Let's Make Art with Games" (Harvey and Samyn 2010). They describe their new approach in *The Beautiful Art Program*: "This program concerns the use of videogame technology for artistic creation" (Harvey and Samyn 2013). Harvey and Samyn postulate the creation of playable artefacts, envisioning "the breadth of human existence captured in interactive art" (Harvey and Samyn 2013). However, they do not resign from the strong authorial vision leading the whole process of creation of the game, and point out that "video-games created by passionate people intent on exploring the potential of this new medium" (Harvey and Samyn 2013). Within the presented perspective, the ideal goal would therefore be the creation of playable art.

The main issue of the discourse of the *guardians of the vision* is that the creative process takes place mainly in the head of the imaginative individual; and, in consequence, is out of touch with the down-to-earth teamwork that creates the digital block of marble discussed above. This feature of the discourse gives the impression that the development on the digital artefact is not as important as its design.

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The discourse of the *guardians of the vision*; while following the romantic understanding of creation; highlights the authorial imagination as a source of vision that leads to the creation of playable artefacts. The artefact itself is considered to be the incarnation, or *analogon* of the vision of the meaningful, aesthetically shaped world. Within the discussed discourse, the key factor

is also individuality — or even individualism — of creators, whose goal is the modification of the existing tradition (Ueda), or even its creative negation (*Tale of Tales*).

The discourse I attempted to outline above is concentrated on the realisation of the authorial vision, in the form of an artistically coherent and synthetic wholeness executed by the team selected by the visionary. The *guardian of the vision* undertakes the task of exploration of her vision, and attempts to crave its ideal form in the digital matter.

Therefore, within the discourse of the *guardians of the vision,* a game is described by the triad of relation with the visionary, the player, and existing games that create the canon; i.e. the source of inspiration or the germ of the revolution. The artefact is then a vehicle for the vision enclosed in the digital medium.

1.3. The Procedural Arguments. The Digital Orators

In the following pages, I will provide an overview of the well-known and widely discussed discourse of *procedural rhetorics.* Within this discourse, the originative activity of the creators of computer games is perceived as "the new type of persuasive and expressive practice" (Bogost 2007, 2).

The discourse of the *digital orators* diverges from the ones previously discussed by highlighting the potential for ideological influence possessed by computer games. In consequence, it focuses on the repeatable impact that the computer game is expected to have on the player, rather than underlining the importance and uniqueness of the relation between the artefact and its creator.

I am going to compare and contrast it with the approaches presented in the two previous chapters. They considered the making of computer games to be a creative practice, which can be aptly described in terms borrowed from discourses of arts or artisanry. In contrast, the procedural rhetorics focuses on the difference between the existing forms of argumentation, in order to present *procedurality* as a persuasive feature exclusive to digital games.

On Procedural Authorship

The idea of *procedural authorship* was introduced by Janet Murray. She coined it in her most famous book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* in order to distinguish the creative endeavours of players within the gameworlds from the efforts undertaken by authors responsible for a whole environment. She explains that:

"Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another. […] In electronic narrative the procedural author is like a choreographer who supplies the rhythms, the context, and the set of steps that will be performed." (Murray 1997, 152–53).

Two of Murray's followers, who became the major theorists of *procedural rhetorics* — also known as the *simulation rhetoric* — are Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca (Bogost 2007; Bogost 2008; Frasca 2003). By developing Murray's idea, they authored the discourse placing authors of digital games closer to programmers than to artists or artisans (Bogost 2007, 4).

However, while highlighting the role of algorithms, behaviours of the system, and rules governing digital representations, they pointed out at different creative area; namely, on *argumentation*. The procedural author is not only (re-)presenting by designing rules of interactions and sequences of artefact's responses to the player's behaviour. Bogost claims that the meaning — which for Murray was emerging from the text presented in the rhythm of programmed procedure — is hidden in the sole procedure. "Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes", he writes (Bogost 2007, 28). In order to underline this fact, while examining the *procedural rhetorics*, I will name the authors the *digital orators.*

The Persuasive Prose

The *digital orator* is authoring procedures in order to represent "how real and imagined systems work" (Bogost 2007, vii); and observe, "how the designer's agenda can slip into the game's inner laws", which is the medium of the ideology preached by their author (Frasca 2003, 233). Therefore, within the discourse of the *digital orators*, the game's inner laws — its rules, dependents, and functions connecting elements of the system — are responsible for its persuasive power (Bogost 2007, 29). The playable artefact is then considered to be a compound of the procedural representation, i.e. the system; and the persuasive argumentation, i.e. the process. When approached connectedly, they make the persuasive system.

As long as for the *guardians of the vision* the key element of the designed artefact was its relation to authorial vision and its emotional dimension; and for the *digital artisans* the most important was the personal involvement in the created computer game; for the *digital orators* the playable artefact is primarily the argument, deriving its power from the systemic representation (Bogost 2007, vii), or simulation (Frasca 2003, 224).

I would like to highlight the parallel between the discussed discourse, and Sartre's understanding of prose. While tracking the differences between prose and poetry, Sartre points out that:

"The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is by nature significative — that is, the words are first of all not objects but designations for objects. It is not first of all a matter of knowing whether they please or displease in themselves; it is a matter of knowing whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion" (Sartre 1988, 35).

The aesthetic function of this kind of utterance is secondary; as long as it is able to clearly represent and make the reading compelling, as well as appeal to the perceiver in order to make them aware of certain problems. Analogically, the persuasive power of the simulation is activated by the *digital orator's* modelling skills, as: "games are just a particular way of structuring simulation, just like narrative is a form of structuring representation" (Frasca 2003, 224).

The main goal is, hence, the representation of one process by the other process, in logical and abstract form of system of interdependencies. However, Bogost does not focus on the theme or scope of the persuasive power of games, but on their sole ability to present argumentation as a working procedure. He accents the *digital orator's* ability to represent the process, and to model the extent of choices available to the player:

"…choices are selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce a desired expressive end" (Bogost 2007, 45).

Due to the modelling, artefacts are able to "make claims about how things work" (Bogost 2007, 29), as they are "deliberate expressions of particular perspectives" (Bogost 2008, 119). Therefore, they present a certain worldview, and their function is to dispel myths and debunk beliefs, as seen from the point of view of their creators. In this dimension, the discourse of the *digital orators* is in closer proximity to the discourse of the *artisans'* way of thought as depicted in chapter 1.1.

Are Games Arguments?

> "Procedural rhetorics do mount propositions:
> each unit operation in a procedural representation is a claim about
> how part of the system it represents does, should, or could function"
> (Bogost 2007, 36).

Within the discussed discourse, the activity of game creators is concentrated on highlighting real problems, and on criticism that is intended to change the existing state of matters. By making an issue explicit, the artefact is designed in order to force the player to take a stance towards the problems it represents; to wilfully and consciously hold her foregoing point of view, or to change her perspective.

The practitioners acting within the discourse of the *digital orators* are *molleindustria*: the authors of "satirical business simulations", "meditations on labor and alienation", and "playable theories" (Pedercini n.d.).

As Paolo Pedercini, the founder of *molleindustria*, said in an interview:

"If you are not saying anything against the dominant system of values, chances are that you are making an artifact that reinforces such ideology" (Anonymous 2014).

The same words could be ascribed to Sartre, who in 1948 claimed that the writer — the proser or the publicist — can never remain neutral:

"To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence. If you name the behaviour of an individual, you reveal it to him; he sees himself. […] After that, how can you expect him to act in the same way? Either he will persist in his behaviour out of obstinacy and with full knowledge of what he is doing, or he will give it up. Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it. I strike at its very heart, I transfix it, and I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it; with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it towards the future" (Sartre 1988, 36–37).

Mounting arguments by creating computer games — just like writing prose

as Sartre sees it — is primarily a field of activism; a field of social criticism, manifestos, and, naturally, of persuasion.

Pedercini excessively criticises the condition of the digital games industry, and proposes to consider games created by *digital* orators to be "homeopathic remedies to the idiocy of mainstream entertainment" (Pedercini n.d.). However, by stating this strong and ujustified argument, istead of revealing issues that should be addressed, he appears to create a false dichotomy in the current media landscape in order to establish a purpose for *digital arguments*. In more considerate words, he explains that;

"…games and simulations can simplify and mirror certain aspects of real world systems while maintaining their dynamic properties. By […] making games we can promote this kind of literacy" (Pedercini 2013).

In his anarchistic manifesto, he declares the willingness to destroy the dominant discourse of the video games industry by the practice of:

"… [u]nderstanding and subverting the deepest videogame mechanics without resorting to dull antagonistic translations or artsy self-referential divertissement" (Pedercini 2003).

The playable artefact is for him a tool of criticism, which starts with the observation of certain processes; continues through its representation in procedural digital form; and ends in persuasive modelling of the extent of users' interactions with the final game. Therefore, the discourse features the:

"…channeling [of] the sacrosanct horror for the current mainstream video games toward a constructive and deconstructive process. Foster a debate involving the galaxies of media-activism, software and net art, regular gamers and their fiercest detractors. Create a space in which theoretical and practical critique march hand in hand" (Pedercini 2003).

Paraphrasing words of Sartre — in the discourse of the *digital rhetors*, artefacts are appeals "in the course of an undertaking, either of me acting upon others, or the others upon me" (Sartre 1988, 35), while the act of designing the procedure undertaken by the *digital orator* makes use of this new medium of arguments participating in the "utilitarian language" (Sartre 1988, 29).

The Critical Voices

As long as the discourse of the *procedural rhetorics* is one of the most recognisable amongst the creators of digital games, the approach of the *digital orators* is often a subject of criticism. However, not because of its activist, involved perspective on the creator's endeavours, but because of the radical assumption that the one clear, authorially defined message can be inscribed into the sole algorithmic procedure that underlies the functioning of the game - which, in consequence, does not require any interpretative effort. According to Miguel Sicart;

"The assumption behind mainstream proceduralism is that the meaning of games is contained *exclusively* in the formal system of the game" (Sicart 2011).

Such a strongly set thesis makes *procedural rhetorics* the subject of criticism. This line of counter argumentation is enforced by the fact that in his book Bogost mainly interprets artefacts designed for explicitly stated purposes; e.g. in order to express a critical point of view of politics; to advertise or educate. In this type of playable artefacts, the audiovisuals are perceived as meaningful before the persuasive process begins, and before the player actually has a chance to recognise her situatedness within the gameworld.

Aarseth argues against proceduralism by claiming that the procedure itself cannot be a medium of meaning, as it can simulate anything when it is devoid of the audiovisual and narrative layers. He points out that two playable artefacts working in an identical procedure can be intended to "represent" conflicting, or even opposite arguments (Aarseth 2015).

Therefore, the discourse of the *digital orators* can be received with the same enthusiasm by the anticapitalistic *molleindustria*, and by the creators of advergames. Their assumptions remain similar, while the goal of argumentation is directed the opposite way.

The extreme stance is hard to defend; however, it makes the digital rhetorics widely present. I therefore think that the discourse of the *digital orators* as a perspective of authors of digital games, enables to highlight the formal, logical and technical side of creation. However, I also believe that the integrity

of the playable artefact is what constitutes its meaning; independently of the differences between discourses.

Conclusions

The discourses of the *digital artisans*, the *guardians of vision,* and the *digital orators*; while approaching the artefact from the external perspective; present very different takes on the situatedness of creators of digital games. Moreover, they significantly change in perceiving the meaning of the created works. Within the first discourse, playable artefacts are handmade, personal items; within the second they become *analogons* of their authors' visions; while within the third they are digital arguments.

In order to condense the first part of the book, in the following table I have delineated the key elements which define the distinctiveness of the presented discourses:

	The discourse of design:		
Elements of situatedness of the author:	*The Digital Artisans*	*The Guardians of the Vision*	*The Digital Orators*
Focal point	personal experience of the author in the process of making the game	the ideal vision preceding its *analogon*	the influence of the persuasive representation
Authorial field	everything, artisanry	vision and direction	programming, argumentation
Author's major function	the artisan; one-man band	the artist; director; visionary	the activist; programmer
Playable artefact	unique, handmade, personal object; self-expression is valued	work of art; communicates vision; emotional realism is a value	persuasive system of representation; conviction is a value

Elements of situatedness of the author:	The discourse of design:		
	The Digital Artisans	*The Guardians of the Vision*	*The Digital Orators*
Goal	exploration and self-expression through handcraft	vision, emotional realism	representation of procedure
Area of exploration	features of the digital matter	aspects of the vision; translation into the analogon	persuasion through representation of processes
Limitations	undervaluation of novelty; questionable status of uniqueness of the artefact	undervaluation of development process; privileging a particular kind of playable artefacts	undervaluation of non-procedural forms of argumentation; conviction that message can be simply inscribed into procedure

The focal point of each discourse is what makes it recognisable. For the *digital artisans,* the central question is the integrity of their quest, as they concentrate on action, not on representation; while for the other two discourses, the focal point is the conceptual integrity of the author's project, vision or argument. Therefore, this kind of consistency is determined by the point of reference external to the process itself.

The second rule of differentiation is the recognition of the author's situatedness, and what is her role in the process of creating the game. In the discourse of the *digital artisans*, the author considers herself to be a one-man band; joyfully carving her personal, expressive object from the digital matter. For the *guardians of the vision*, the author's role is directing her skilful team, and controlling the congruence of the shape of the artefact with her intentions. While in the discourse of the *digital orators*, the author is expected to create a plausible procedure, the aptness of the argument is primarily dependent on its representation in the functions of the game.

The above juxtaposition constitutes the basis to sketching a comparison of scope of the authorial autonomy within the outlined discourses. The *digital*

artisan recognises herself as the most independent author; albeit her role is connected with the sphere traditionally referred to as the everyday, shared, and private; while the other two discourses are connected with the public sphere. The romantic visionary perceives herself as separated from the world, but able to share her original creation and make it understandable; while highly skilled orators are ascribed a capability to rationally and argumentatively shape the public sphere.

The next point to collate is the scope of the creative process ascribed to the author within the discussed discourses. For the *guardians of the vision*, it is the process of direction of imaginary performance, and creation of the emotionally compelling *analogon*; while with regard to the *digital artisan*, it is a set of experiments and exploration of the digital matter, as well as a form of self-reflection based on creative activity. On the other hand, for the *digital orators*, it stems from the analysis of the problem and the system which governs the state of things, and its critical translation into the authored program.

In addition, the connection between the artefact and its external context is perceived disparately within all three discourses. For the *digital orators*, the most important is reference to the represented process and is oriented on its consequences, i.e. on *mimesis*, as defined by Aristotle, who argues for imitating characters, not appearances (Aristotle 2008). For the *guardians of the vision*, the reference system is the imagination of the author and her envisioned intentional object; while for the *digital artisan*, what is most significant is the process of creation: in its social, critical — but above all else — self-expressive dimension.

What connects the discourses discussed in the first part of the book is that they expose the perspective of the author, reveal the game designer's situatedness towards their own work, and make it a crucial part of the meaning of the artefact within the creative situation.

The reflective turn enables them to delineate why it is important to make digital games from the perspective of their authors, and how the creators reflect over their own activity. Therefore, as Sartre puts it;

"Reflection [...] is a type of being in which the for-itself is in order to be to itself what it is. Reflection is not then a capricious upsurge into the pure indifference of being, but it arises in the perspective of a *for*" (Sartre, 1978, 160).

It is hence the *perspective of a for* which defines the artefacts as worthy of creative endeavours, and makes them a substantial part of their authors' existential projects.

In consequence, the playable artefact, just like any other object, can never be approached just as itself, as abstracted from the particular situatedness it co-creates. What connects the research concerning perspectives of the author of digital artefact with the study of perspectives of the player, is an attempt to embrace how the artefact is defined by its unique bond with the individual; the author's or the player's existential project. As long as the artefact is always considered in relation to the individual, and approached as created, perceived, played (Leino 2009), or understood, I think that questions regarding the identity or non-identity of the object lose their critical power. What is explored here is situatedness of the individual towards the phenomenon she approaches.

Part 2. Perspectives of the Avatar

2.1. Questing the Player's Perspectives[1]

Delving into *perspective of a for* will take a different direction in the following pages; as the area of exploration is here determined by the perspective of the player, and her situatedness towards the single player digital game with avatar.

I will start by discussing the methodological problem of the research perspective that occurs in studies on game aesthetics, while elaborating on the difference between the aesthetics focused on the playable artefact from the external perspective, and which does not refer to the internal point of view; i.e. an *objectifying aesthetics*; and contrasting it with an *involved aesthetics* that is based on the internal perspective and its interplay with the external point of view. As long as the former presents its method, object, and results as independent from the position of the researcher, the latter exposes the importance of making explicit the subjective situatedness towards the artefact, which cannot be considered as abstracted from the situation.

From the perspective of the *involved aesthetics*, the researcher approaching the game with avatar gets acquainted with the artefact while adopting the position of an agent; i.e., a self-avatar primarily situated within the gameworld; and then distancing from it. Therefore, the claim for objectivism - as well as conclusions about the abstract nature of the artefact - is based on the subjective position of the self-avatar established by, and experienced within, the particular gameworld. I will therefore argue that the *objectifying aesthetics* diminish the salience of the fact that it relies on the *gameplay situation*, while making claims about the artefact.

In consequence, I will outline an intermediary perspective based on reflection over the existential situatedness within the gameworld. Within the presented perspective, before the researcher can draw conclusions from the external point of view, she learns to act within the conditions of experience provided by the *gameplay situation* of the particular game, in order to interpret it from

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the point of view of the in-game *aesthetic situation*[2].

Existential Situatedness and Features of an Artefact

From the point of view of existential phenomenology and aesthetics, the research area does not concern experiences of the others, even if we are able to empirically observe and record them. Moreover, multiplication — intersubjectivity or the replicability of these experiences within the research group — does not validate any hypothetical existential experiment. As a result of this, the most important question can be formulated as follows: who am I, and what defines my research area when I start to philosophically examine a computer game?

The presented point of view is anchored in *an existence* — "*For-itself*"[3], or *Dasein* (Heidegger 2001, 27 [7]) — defined as "an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being. […] Furthermore, *Dasein* is an entity which in each case I myself am" (Heidegger 2001, 78 [52-53]). This is a perspective of experiencing, comprehending, and understanding that is characterised by its ability to be reflectively perceived "from inside" as "I". Consequently, my understanding of being a player is anchored in my own existence.

The second important element of the existential perspective is a world; that is, the omnipresent "reference system" for the existence. The world is then also always perceived form inside (Heidegger 2001, 81–82 [55–56]; Sartre 1978, 3–4). It means that the being-in-the-world cannot transcend her subjective situatedness, and look at her "objective" condition within this world. I am the being-in-the-world; therefore my agency is framed by this world and my situatedness within it (Sartre 1978, 31).

In my everyday world, one of the objects I can reflect upon is a game

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[2] I will elaborate on the *aesthetic situation* in the next chapters, while in the present pages I will limit it to the necessary explanation.

[3] "The being of for-itself is defined […] as being what it is not and not being what it is", see: Sartre 1978, lxv

approached from the external perspective. From this point of view, the game is considered — similarly to the perspective described in the first part of this book — to be an object existing in the world in a particular way, related to its author or perceiver, interpreted within discourses and co-shaping them; it is the artefact - "the game, as it exists in the world" (Leino 2012b, 58).

What can I infer from the artefact's position within the world, the position amongst other similar cultural objects? How can I do it?

According to Olli Tapio Leino, the playable artefact is a technological object, where "materiality and process are weaved together so tight that from the player's perspective they are inseparable" (Leino 2012a). In order to learn something about the playable artefact, I need to "use" it; that is, to check its specific "in-order-to" or "manipulability" [*Handlichkeit*]" (Heidegger 2001, 98 [69]). Heidegger defines this form of usability as a "kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use" (Heidegger 2001, 95 [67]).

I believe that the approach of objectifying the aesthetic of computer games is convergent with Heidegger's theoretic approach to tools. It does not separate the internal perspective, but points at the player's engagement observed from the external point of view in order to build their knowledge about the artefact upon it. According to Heidegger:

"The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment, […] the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is-as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific 'manipulability' [*Handlichkeit*] of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses-in which it manifests itself in its own right we call 'readiness-to-hand' [*Zuhandenheit*]" (Heidegger 2001, 98 [69]).

Considering this approach of external objectification, the artefact is ready-to-hand, and its manipulability discovered in the process of using it constitutes a basis for claims about the artefact itself. As an artefact, it can be ascribed certain features; e.g. it needs a certain technological input - it is a piece of software, and a cultural text, amongst others.

Espen Aarseth points out that an investigation of the artefact could process in the same way as research of another aesthetic object like film, music, or visual arts, "but with the added challenge of gameplay" (Aarseth 2007, 131). This player-researcher, Aarseth writes:

"…considers her own playing experience as a valid basis for doing theory, and is interested in the game as a cultural, expressive object. The fact that she is studying an object that at the time of study is a process partly instigated by her, and not necessarily shared by any other player, is seldom a topic for discussion, but bracketed by experience of play" (Aarseth 2007, 131).

Aarseth emphasises upon the processual dimension of the game and the player's input, as well as the uniqueness of her experience with the artefact. This perspective can be supported by Leino's definition of a playable artefact, which is considered to be an element of "a subset of all technological artifact based on their ability to evaluate the user's choices" (Leino 2012a)[4].

However, I think that the position of the researcher approaching the game from the angle of the *objectifying aesthetics* is based on the situatedness learned from the internal perspective and within circumstances created by the gameworld that, in turn, is considered to be a source of knowledge about the artefact as functioning in an external cultural context. Therefore, while approaching the artefact from this point of view, conclusions are drawn from the player's experiences, situatedness, and agency within the gameworld; i.e. from playing the game and participating in a gameplay situation; and ascribed to the game as an object existing within the world.

Therefore, the argumentation presented above merges two points of view which I would like to distinguish in order to highlight the player's perspective; the external perspective that enables the player to mark this particular "subset of all technological artefacts" (Leino 2012a); and the internal one, that enables them to observe the process of evaluation of their choices, inasmuch as they are consequential within the gameworld. In a nutshell, I believe that

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[4] Leino develops the concept of "studying the game as played", as opposed to "studying a game by playing it" in order to differentiate between the concrete artefact conditioning the players' experiences, and game as transmedial/ideal object (Leino 2009; Leino 2010, 125, 146-151).

the playable artefact can be studied not only as a process influenced by the player, but also as the process through which the player's situatedness is shaped.

The Gameplay Issue

Aarseth claims that the artefact offers the player a position of the "implied player" defined as "a function of the game, a slot in a game machine that can be filled by any rational, critical, informed person" (Aarseth 2007, 131). Therefore, he translates into the area of digital games the thesis stated by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*; "all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players" (Gadamer 2004, 106).

The position of the implied player is then determined by the form of the artefact; hence, it is a default stance the player is proposed to take. However, as shown by Aarseth's (2007) and Leino's (2009) studies - "transgressive playing" (Aarseth 2007, 132) or "playing with the game" (Leino 2009, 11) - the position of the implied player does not render impossible other behaviours towards the artefact.

While asking a question about the player's situatedness towards the game, I should then concentrate on the gameplay in the first place. From the externally objectified point of view, the gameplay can generally be defined as performance undertaken in search of a proper "manipulability" positively evaluated by the artefact. According to Aarseth and Calleja, "not all interactions with the objects we call games (or objects within these) result in game-like activities" (Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Moreover, as Leino pointed out (Leino 2012a), because of glitches and bugs within an artefact, as well as strategies of playing unforeseen by its designers (Cf. Aarseth 2007), an even smaller fraction of actions performed by the player can be called "a gameplay".

Furthermore, when the researcher shifts her perspective from the artefact to her own performance, the problem of identity of the studied area arises. It was pointed out by Leino who argues that "the objects of study are different from the two perspectives: it is not necessarily the 'same game' one is studying

from two angles" (Leino 2009, 6). He proposes to connect the two by "the materiality" of the artefact; i.e. these aspects of the game "being played which do not originate in the player and which are shared by all players and playings of the same game, thus transcending all particular playings" (Leino 2009, 7).

Nevertheless, the intersubjectivity of the experience does not necessarily make its object more convincing and more "real", as it remains a sum of the individuals' experiences. Therefore, I will try to outline the different solution from the phenomenological point of view. Instead of looking for justification external to the individual experience, I will take a closer look at the conditions of this experience, in order to make explicit the player's situatedness as a self-avatar within the gameworld.

Introducing the *Involved Aesthetics*

While approaching the involved aesthetics as distinct from the objectifying aesthetics, I seek conditions of experience as they are shaped within the *gameplay situation*; i.e. when the self-avatar is pre-reflectively experienced as the self within the gameworld. From the in-game perspective, I can describe these experiences as a result of the cooperation between the self-avatar and the gameworld; that is, as a gameplay situation. While answering questions concerning what I experience, how I experience it, and how motivated I am while playing, I can lead an existential analysis of the gameplay situation that takes place when the gameworld is experienced from the internal perspective. I would like to underline that claims grounded in this perspective do not concern the objective nature of the examined object. On the contrary, the playable artefact is here considered to be an intentional object; i.e. *concretization* (Ingarden 1981, 175); while the gameplay is interpreted in terms of the *adventure* experienced as a self-avatar within the gameworld (Sartre 2007, 36–38). Therefore, the researcher does not perform "reverse engineering" (Leino 2012a); that would try to understand construction of the objective artefact from the experience of playing with it; but is limited to a description of their aesthetic experience co-shaped by their own activity.

The perspective of research involved into the gameplay situation is then

co-created by activity of the self-avatar and her situatedness within the researched field. I think that this particular perspective enables the researcher to understand the experiential dimension of the gameplay situation, and provides her with tools that enable her to distinguish it from transgressive play; which is what seems to be missing from the objectifying aesthetics.

Moreover, the *involved aesthetics* provides the player with the experiential perspective that enables her to reflect over herself within a game, as well as over her own situatedness within the gameworld; i.e. "the product of both facticity and the *For-itself's* way of accepting and acting upon its facticity" (Sartre 1978, 633). A close look at this position provides a basis for existential analysis of the gameplay led from an insider's point of view, which considers the gameplay situation as such.

The Avatar's Perspective: *ludic subject*, *self-avatar*, and the *personal object*

But who is the subject acting "within" a game, that I called "a self-avatar"? Who is the participant of the "gameplay situation" that experiences it through the alleged position of the implied player? Who is experiencing the gameworld as an inhabited world; as a world they live in?

These questions concern a world that establishes the gameplay situation for the self-avatar; the stance she cannot exit as long as she wants to play.

Daniel Vella proposes calling the perspective outlined by the relation between the avatar and the player within the gameworld "ludic subjectivity", and defines it as follows:

"…an entity that belongs to the gameworld, and is thus in a position to perceive the gameworld from an internal perspective, while the implied player is the standpoint the game establishes for the player as an individual outside the gameworld, engaging with the game as an artefact" (Vella 2015, 24).

Therefore, while considering the in-game situation, instead of talking about an implied player as an alleged function of an artefact, we could focus

on the ludic subject to seek the way the in-game existence can be experienced, framed and described.

I would like to point out that while experiencing the game as a ludic subject, one is able to set their own goals within the gameworld to some degree, varying from game to game. Therefore, as long as outlining the subjective position seems to be necessary, it is not sufficient to distinguish the gameplay situation from other forms of interaction with the gameworld. However, adopting the position of the ludic subject is a precondition for experiencing and fulfilling any goals within the gameworld — also those experienced as a gameplay; because "the ludic subject is essentially – and prior to the opening up of any objectifying distance – experienced as "I" while engaging with the gameworld" (Vella 2014b, 16).

Hitherto, one more important element of the jigsaw is still missing. Vella points out that:

"…the player simultaneously plays out her experiential and existential being-in-the-gameworld and perceives it from a point of view outside the game, from which her own being-in-the-gameworld is seen as an intrinsic part of the game's textual and aesthetic unfolding" (Vella 2015, 55).

However, I think that my own being-in-the-gameworld can be reflectively understood from inside. It can be approached from the point of view of the aesthetic situation, as a form of auto-reflection over the self-avatar as being in the gameplay situation. In light of this, I have decided to cease using the term "ludic subject" despite its pertinence, as I would like to single out additional features, which stems from this reflective turn of the situated subjectivity I call *self-avatar* to themselves. The self-avatar is understood here as an emergent being, consisting of the player's existence, her intentional acts, and features of the avatar. In consequence, the existential situation I outlined in the first paragraphs is doubled within the gameworld (Möring 2013, 119). The departure point for outlining the gameplay situation therefore entails a consideration of the conditions for experience and performance of the self-avatar, instead of the features and functions of the artefact.

By using the term the *self-avatar* I would like to underline that as long

as it remains inside the gameworld, the selfhood cannot be exchanged for experiencing or observing this position as the other (Vella 2014). In view of this, I define the self-avatar as a subjective position that enables cognition of the particular gameworld from the point of view of the gameplay situation. It is analogical to the ludic subject as long as it is a figure that is intended to capture how the subjective position shapes the cognition of the player in terms of existential philosophy. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, it can be auto-reflectively recognised as an aesthetic form in light of the in-game aesthetic situation. From the point of view of the external position — built upon the involved one, which makes it different from the objectifying aesthetics — the self-avatar can be recognised as an aesthetic object that can be interpreted within a wider cultural context. All three perspectives interrelate; hence they can shape experience within each of them, as well as of each other.

On *Involved Aesthetics* and *Objectifying Aesthetics*

In order for it to be understood, the experience within the game needs to be reinterpreted from the points of view outlined by different types of situatedness. I believe that the analogical difference was mapped by Paul de Man in his discussion of the bias between rhetoric as practice of the acts of persuasion, and rhetoric as a system of tropes that can be recognised only as a set of these acts (Man 1979, 130–31). He makes the aporetic observation; the act can take place exclusively within the system, however, acts are a foundation of the system. Therefore, the system conceals its own source; i.e. the fact that it projects and persuades for its own presence and validity instead of making a constatation of them. In consequence, the presence and pertinence of the system of tropes — and analogically, the objective artefact independent of the player's situated engagement — turns out to be the camouflage for the performative acts of establishing it. This paradox makes the artefact dubiously independent from both the acts performed within the gameworld, and its existence as a culturally engaged text as it participates in multiple discourses. Therefore, the two sides — the internal and

the external perspective — need to be considered as mutually dependent[5].

In light of this, the key to outlining the philosophical importance of the distinction between the involved aesthetics and the objectifying aesthetics entails the exposition of the passage from the experience of *thrownness* into the gameworld, to the interpretation of the game from the external perspective. How are the two positions connected with each other from the point of view of the involved aesthetics?

As the external perspective relates to the interpretation of the game as text, it is anyway given to the player in her particular reading. By considering subjectivity, this form of external perspective formulate claims on *concretization* (Ingarden 1981, 175) objectified as an imaginative wholeness, and has the potential to reveal the position of the interpreter towards the game. In other words, a game perceived from the external point of view is approached as a text subjected to reinterpretations performed by particular players. The game hence becomes understandable as the player's own finished adventure; a memory that includes her own subjective impact on the gameworld.

* * *

While looking from the internal point of view, the self-avatar experiences a gameplay situation and co-creates the game. When she reflects over her own position, she can undertake the existential and aesthetical analysis of the gameplay situation from the perspective of the in-game aesthetic situation. In turn, from the external point of view of the involved aesthetics, the game is considered to be a completed concretization that can be subjected to reinterpretations, and this way related to other existing texts.

The perception of the objectifying aesthetics concentrates on features ascribed to artefacts, while diminishing the importance of the situatedness of the researcher; although the main issue within the involved aesthetics is the need to fill the gap between the experience inside the gameworld, and

[5] Cf. the discussion about the distinction between the game as object and the game as process (Cf. Leino 2009; Leino 2012; Vella 2015).

its understanding as a text approached from the external perspective.

The in-game situatedness is revealed in the interplay of the in-game perspectives, consisting of the gameplay situation and the aesthetic situation; and the external point of view that enables the player to refer to her cultural literacy. However, the transition between them encounters Paul de Man's *aporia* of rhetorics as a system of tropes and rhetoric as persuasion; hence, it needs to be clearly stated that the passage leading from inside the gameworld will not establish the artefact as the object that can be examined in isolation.

2.2. The *Gameplay Situation* and the *Aesthetic Situation*

"Man continually carries with him a pre-judicative comprehension of his essence,
but due to this very fact he is separated from it by a nothingness"
(J.-P. Sartre 1978, 35).

"The aesthetic experience constitutes a specific — aesthetic — object,
which cannot be equated with anything real"
(Ingarden 1970, 3:97).

In order to characterise the two types of situatedness that shape relations between the self-avatar and the gameworld, I will subsequently focus on the internal point of view, and follow a thread of digital game research linked to the involved perspective.

I argue that in order to consider the gameworld as open for interpretation from the in-game perspective, the two experiential positions of the self-avatar need to be closely examined. For this purpose, I will elaborate on a *gameplay situation* and an *aesthetic situation*, which have been roughly sketched out in the previous chapter.

The two in-game subjective positions emerge collaterally, and often condition each other as lived in and as being beyond the particular situation. I would like to underline that in both the crucial element is the *self-avatar* perceived as situated within the gameworld.

The *gameworld* can be defined as the existential, spatiotemporal environment of the in-game life as experienced from the perspective of the gameplay situation; while from the perspective of the aesthetic situation, the gameworld is the anticipated wholeness of the intentional object that the self-avatar expects to concretize by co-shaping the gameplay situation.

In a *gameplay situation*; which I will define by recontextualising the Sartrean notion of the situation; the self-avatar is pre-reflectively experienced as the self within the gameworld. I argue that the gameplay situation constitutes a framework for an *inauthentic mode of existence*, where the limitations of the self-avatar are experienced as the *They*, and perceived as a part of the

self-avatar (Cf. Heidegger 2001, 220 [175-176]).

In an *aesthetic situation* — inspired by Roman Ingarden's term, which I will discuss and redefine later in the text — the experiential structure provided by the *self-avatar* is reflectively considered to be a crucial element of the acts of *concretization* of the gameworld, as it provides a subjective standpoint for perceiving it. However, this structure itself is not abandoned when it is reflected upon. Oppositely, the object of this aesthetic situation is not the artefact as grasped from the external point of view, but the aestheticized gameworld; the world that is already thought as perceived from the perspective of the self-avatar. In consequence, the aesthetic situation can be characterised as an attempt to grasp the gameplay situation and to reinterpret it.

The main purpose of this perspective is including, exposing and (re)uniting the issue of the subjective stance within a gameworld; and pointing out the aesthetic situation that is primarily established as internal to the aesthetic object by reflection over the gameworld as it is perceived by the self-avatar. Therefore, in this chapter I am not interested in the game as an object that is manipulated and interacted with, or read and understood from the external perspective; but in the aesthetic object that is established by, through and for the self-avatar, which at the same time is a central part of the established concretization. In consequence, the self-avatar, as a part of this concretization, is co-shaped by herself.

The *Gameplay Situation*

According to Sartre, an individual is nothingness. They emerge as being amongst other beings, and are always tied to the world they are thrown into.

"Our being is immediately 'in situation'; that is, it arises in enterprises and knows itself first in so far as it is reflected in those enterprises. We discover ourselves then in a world peopled with demands, in the heart of projects 'in the course of realization'" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 39).

Situation — the first notion I would like to introduce — is then understood in *Being and Nothingness* as a system of synchronic and diachronic, cognitive, and spatiotemporal relations between an individual and a world as it is perceived

from the particular perspective. Moreover, this is the situation which makes an individual the particular person. In turn, it is the individual's engagement that turns the set of unrelated objects into the world which acquires meaning for the person pursuing her own existential project. Therefore, the existential situation covers the condition of subjectivity, its attitude toward this world, and its major feature; i.e. a "position apprehended by the *For-itself* which is in situation" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 548), and which makes it unique.

An individual's situation changes as they undertake and modify their existential projects in response to their own situatedness. Characteristics of the situation provided by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* can be encapsulated in the following remarks:

1) The situation is outlined by relations between the self and objects within a world; namely, their usefulness or uselessness for the undertaken project.

2) The situation can be experienced as purposeful from an internal perspective with relation to its goal.

3) "The situation is the organized totality of the being-there, interpreted and lived in and through being beyond" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 549).

4) The situation is concrete, unique, and personal.

5) The situation is neither purely subjective nor objective, but a relation between the two.

6) An individual is able to change their situation from inside; however, they are unable not to be in any situation, because the *situatedness* is what determines meaning of encountered objects, which changes accordingly (Cf. J.-P. Sartre 1978, 549–53).

The Sartrean characteristics of the situation are focused on the observation that it is the factor changing significantly due to shifts of the subjective point of view, approach, existential project, or even the mood of the individual. For example, the situation of two persons working in laboratory in search for a new cancer treatment; one scientist is interested in an examined substance

because it potentially has ground-breaking properties, while the second is interested in patents and business opportunities connected with this discovery.

Analogically to the Sartrean description of the existential situation, I propose to define the *gameplay situation* as a system of interdependencies between a gameworld, a self-avatar, and a perceptual position of the self-avatar towards the gameworld, as they are perceived from the point of view of the self-avatar.

The first difference between the existential situation and the gameplay situation is then the status of an individual, which in the gameplay situation is strictly connected with the avatar. In consequence, the player's situation is determined by a self-avatar she gradually actualises, i.e. the avatar experienced as self, and its position within the gameworld.

When the self-avatar enters a gameplay situation of a single-player computer game, she approaches the game as a world[1]; she emerges as being, amongst other beings, only while related to the world she is thrown into. She learns and leads the existential project of in-game life. It makes the gameworld meaningful to her on an existential — as well as aesthetic — level. Therefore, the gameplay situation establishes the conditions of experience that provides the player with a preconceived understanding of the actions they need to perform in order to play the game; namely, a form of existential *falling* they have agreed upon when entering the gameplay situation. The self-avatar is experienced through non-reflective *cogito*, when "the circuit of selfness is non-thetic and consequently the identification of what I am remains non-thematic, this 'being-in-itself' of myself which the world refers to as me is necessarily hidden from my knowledge" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 595).

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[1] I will compare and highlight the differences between an understanding of the world in our everyday experience, and a gameworld in Chapter 2.4.

Falling into the *They* and *thrownness*

Is it possible to abandon the gameplay situation while playing the game then? I believe that even if the player tries to abandon the subjective position provided by the gameplay situation in order to establish her own personal existential projects and goals within the gameworld, her position is still built with regard to the gameplay situation and the existential project of the self-avatar.

For instance, in the hidden object puzzle adventure genre, the player is repeatedly reminded of the project she is expected to realise by sparkling areas within the rooms she explores, pop-ups providing hints about her goals, or even exact instructions on the next step she should perform in given circumstances.

Even if she does not follow any of these hints, the world continuously offers her friendly reminders of duties resulting from the position she is supposed to occupy. Therefore, the self-avatar does not abandon the gameplay situation, but acts in defiance of it; as long as the general theme of the gameplay situation is playing this particular game.

The process of meaning-making within the gameplay situation is then undertaken from the point of view of the self-avatar. In consequence, both the information available to the self-avatar and activities she is capable of are expected to be understandable, justified, and meaningful through the events taking place in the gameworld, or the avatar's position towards them.

Due to its rigidity, I argue that from the existential point of view, the subjective position offered by the gameplay situation is a proposition of what Heidegger referred to as "falling into the 'they'". *Falling*, as defined by Heidegger, is a mode of being when the subjectivity:

"…is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the 'world' of its concern. This 'absorption in . . .' […] has mostly the character of Being-lost in the publicness of the 'they'. *Dasein* has, in the first instance, fallen away [*abgefallen*] from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the 'world'" (Heidegger 2001, 220 [175]).

The self-avatar would then be the player's self, merged with the already-given perspective of the avatar she is expected to internalise. As long as this falling of the self-avatar is unavoidable, the existential diagnosis loses its ethical overtones, and becomes a feature of the being-in-the-gameworld, as perceived from the point of view of the self-avatar[2].

In consequence, the gameplay situation is based on the first-person experience of an unavoidable, willing, but not necessarily conscious "falling into the 'they'"; the experience of being guided by the situatedness and treated as an object within the world. I believe that this particular perspective of the self-avatar, which the player adopts in the gameplay situation, is what enables it to be distinguished from other forms of interaction with the gameworld.

The Existential Meaning

The understanding of the *gameplay situation* as a concrete totality of being-in-the-gameworld establishes its existential meaning, as it is pre-reflectively comprehended and experienced by the self-avatar. In many models, this internal understanding is contrasted directly with reading the game as a text from the external perspective; e.g. heuristics, as opposed to hermeneutics, as it "does not make the process of playing its object but it *is* the process of playing a game" (Möring 2013, 305); or ludic hermeneutics as opposed to text hermeneutics (Karhulahti 2012a; Karhulahti 2012b). However, these propositions do not consider subjective situatedness as a major determinant of understanding the game. Moreover, the distinction I propose is threefold, as pointed out in the previous chapter. Therefore, the existential understanding of the game from the perspective of the gameplay situation can be grasped from the perspective of the in-game aesthetic situation that will shortly be sketched out.

Moreover, the existential meaning is not connected with representation, as in Gadamer's famous formulation, where he contrasts play as practice with

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[2] The same situation takes place with the phenomena of *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness*, as discussed in Chapter 2.4.

play as representation (Cf. Gadamer 2004, 108; Möring 2013, 161; Galloway 2006, 104). The existential meaning is not based on representation, but on a subjective experience of meaningful action experienced as a *suspension of freedom* (Cf. Chapter 2.5). The source of this meaning are inauthentic modes of being, which provide the self-avatar with the conviction that all her endeavours within the gameworld are justified (Cf. Chapter 2.4).

Being in and *Being beyond*

> "The very application of the formula 'that is' to man
> causes all that is designated, to *have-been*"
> (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 35).

Sartre points out that "it is impossible to consider a situation from the outside; it is fixed in a *form in itself*" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 548). However, he also notes that "the situation is the organized totality of the being-there, interpreted and lived in and through being beyond" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 549). Therefore, the phenomenal condition of the particular gameplay situation needs to be known by the player from *being in,* in order to be recognised as a point of departure for self-reflection, as considered to be a form of *being beyond*. In light of this, I believe that the gameplay situation outlines the position of the self-avatar that constitutes a subjective stance reflected upon in the aesthetic situation.

The wider understanding of the gameplay situation — or, as Sartre pointed out, of any situation — can be embraced in a movement of transition between *being in* and *being beyond*. Therefore, as the gameplay situation makes the player participate in the game from the perspective of the self-avatar, which is determined by the in-game the *They*, they do not have any possibility to escape from it; but while they start to reflectively comprehend their subjective position as the self-avatar within a gameworld, they enter an aesthetic situation to embrace the gameplay from the position of *being beyond*.

I will elaborate on the moment of interplay between the gameplay situation and the aesthetic situation in the next chapter, whereas now I would like

to indicate that it can be understood in terms of the pre-reflective consciousness of the subject in the gameplay situation, and reflective consciousness oriented towards the pre-reflective one:

"In the act of reflecting I pass judgement on the consciousness reflected-on; I am ashamed of it, I am proud of it, I will it, I deny it, etc. The immediate consciousness which I have of perceiving does not permit me either to judge or to will or to be ashamed. It does not know my perception, does not posit it; all that there is of intention in my actual consciousness is directed toward the outside, toward the world. In turn, this spontaneous consciousness of my perception is constitutive of my perceptive consciousness. In other words, every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, liii).

Making the gameplay situation an object of the aesthetic situation shifts the direction of the self-avatar's cognition, and reveals restrictions and possibilities originating from her situatedness. In other words, while acting within the gameplay situation;

"…at each instant we are thrust into the world and engaged there. This means that we act before positing our possibilities and that these possibilities which are disclosed as realized or in process of being realized refer to meanings which necessitate special acts in order to be put into question" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 37).

The act of putting into question the meaning of my actions as the self-avatar, while still being situated within the gameworld, is what I would like to present as the main characteristics of what I call the in-game *aesthetic situation*, reflectively grasping the way in which the self-avatar's experience of the gameworld is shaped by existential defence mechanisms[3], which in turn are considered to be an aesthetic form of experience of the gameworld.

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[3] Discussed in chapter 2.4.

Involving the *Aesthetic Situation*

While working on the phenomenology of literature, Roman Ingarden coined and defined the term *aesthetic situation* in order to outline the object of study of aesthetics (1981, 173-180)[4]. By definition, the *aesthetic situation* considers the subjective and objective elements that plays a role in the process of creation and perception of the work of art. Ingarden argues that the term "situation" enables him to:

"…avoid talking about this purely subjective or objective moments as if they were two separate research areas, when they were just two aspects of the […] total aesthetic situation, the […] meeting of the created object and the emerging potential object, with a perceiver, that is, a recipient"[5].

Here, I would like to concentrate exclusively on the section of the *aesthetic* situation, i.e. on the situatedness of the perceiver towards the work of art. As Maria Gołaszewska, the successor of Ingardenian aesthetics, writes,

„Dependently on what recipient perceives the artefact [...], the experiences are shaped differently, different qualities of the values are exposed, and even the whole aesthetic situation is shaped differently"[6].

This specific perceiver subjects the artefact to "concretional acts" in the process of co-creating an aesthetic, intentional object (Cf. Ingarden 1976, 414).

"Undefined places are removed in particular concretizations by more or less detailed specifying an appropriate object, which [...] 'fulfills' the place. However, this 'fulfillment' is not strictly framed by defined moments of the object, hence it can vary in different concretizations"[7].

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[4]   Roman Ingarden's understanding of the act of reading, and his orientation on the active role of the reader, were pioneering in his times (Cf. Burzyńska, Markowski 2006, 95). As long as he studied the most abstract and formal features of works of art, his formulations on the *aesthetic situation* opened the field for culturally and existentially-oriented studies on literature. The term was later discussed and developed by Maria Gołaszewska (1984).

[5]   *Ibidem*, 173.

[6]   (Gołaszewska 1984, 292). Quotation translated by author.

[7]   (Ingarden 1976, 21). Quotation translated by author.

As the aesthetic object needs to be actively maintained by the perceiver, the emerging potential aesthetic object is a result of acts of *concretization*, i.e. the co-creation undertaken by the perceiver. Therefore, there is no aesthetic object as such that anyone can approach.

"Aesthetic objects, as distinct from existentially autonomous individual objects, are existentially heteronymous, i.e., derivative and existentially dependent on the acts constituting them — the creative acts of the artist and the receptive experience of a reader, listener, or spectator. Although an aesthetic object arises as the object of an aesthetic experience, it is at the same time an existentially separate object: it forms a complete whole transcendent of the acts" (Gniazdowski 2010, 167).

I argue that the term *aesthetic situation*, when limited to the perceiver's perspective, can also be used to embrace two aspects of understanding the computer game.

The first one rises from within the game and reflects over the in-game position of the self-avatar, who realises their situatedness while perceiving the gameworld. Hence, I will propose a consideration of the in-game *aesthetic situation* as based and built on the *gameplay situation*.

However, two questions need to be answered here: the problem of what is concretised which involves the issue of the *aesthetic object* co-created by the concretional acts; while the second, of what makes this situation an aesthetic one, which refers to the *aesthetic character* of the in-game situation.

The second question — which I will discuss at the beginning of the third part of the book — frames the game approached from the *external perspective*, when it is objectified and considered to be a text open for interpretation.

Rising from within

The first difference between the aesthetic approach to a traditional work of art, which is the object of Ingardenian aesthetics, and a single player digital games with avatar as perceived from the in-game perspective, is the difference of the subjective position of the perceiver. The recipient's stance; when they

reflect over themselves in relation to the literary work of art, is related to; but independent of the shape of the world depicted by the literary work of art. Hence, the acts of concretization can be performed over the object, while the position of the self-avatar is *situated within* the concretized gameworld, and her reflection over her own activities within the gameworld takes account of her influence on the actual shape of this world[8].

Even if one is immersed in other media or works of art (Ryan 2001, 120-139), these artefacts do not provide the perceiver with the experiential structure that would make them *situated* within the artefact, as long as the situatedness assumes the possibility of changing it *from inside*. Moreover, they do not allow the perceiver to act within this experiential framework.

Daniel Vella pointed out the possibility of acting within the aesthetic form as a distinctive feature of digital games. He writes that:

"the direct result of their constituting an aesthetic form in which it is one's own actions, and the ludic subjectivity they enact, that come to be inscribed in the externalised (and objectified) form of the aesthetic object, leading to a kind of self-presence within the aesthetic object that is of an entirely different order to the painting's tacit acknowledgement of the viewer's look" (Vella, 2016b).

However, I believe that the sentence quoted above connects two perspectives I would like to analyze separately: the in-game perspective and the external perspective. The in-game *aesthetic situation*, which I am currently pointing out, embraces the self-avatar's actions when they are reflected upon from *within* the gameworld. I argue that this situation needs to be differentiated from the moment when the subjective stance of the self-avatar is abandoned and the gameworld becomes objectified from the external perspective, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.1.

What, then, are the consequences of such a distinction? Going back

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8   Wolfgang Iser's concept of the *moving viewpoint* is defined as "the reader's position within the text" (Iser, 1980, 114). However, the self-avatar's perspective not only make her *perceive*, but also make decisions, *can* and *act* within the given circumstances; it is not just a viewpoint, but also an existential situatedness that enables her to exercise her agency and reflect over it.

to Ingardenian terms, what is concretized by the self-avatar in this in-game aesthetic situation? And what is the result of this concretization?

I argue that in the *in-game aesthetic situation* the self-avatar reflectively addresses a form of her own subjectivity, and the actions she performs within it. She recognizes them as an aesthetic composition of phenomena; such as *bad faith*, *spirit of seriousness,* and *adventure*, perceived as elements of her situatedness within the anticipated wholeness of the gameworld, the worldliness of which is preserved, hence aestheticized by the act of reflection.

The concretization is then focused on fulfilling the undefined places of perceptual structures of the self-avatar; e.g. a form of bad faith, and perceiving the gameworld, its current state and anticipated meaning of wholeness, from the point of view of the concretized self-avatar.

In consequence, in the self-avatar's reflection, their own *situatedness within the gameworld* becomes the aesthetic object. The self-avatar reflectively objectifies itself as the situated being in-the-gameworld; however, their situatedness as considered to be an aesthetic object cannot be equated with the game as a text considered from the external perspective, despite it constituting a basis for synthesis approached from the point of view external to the gameworld.

From the internal point of view, the self-avatar remains situated within the gameworld, analogically to the individual situated in the world, and "since he is situated in relation to the world in its entirety [he manifests] the world itself" (Sartre 1988, 260). In consequence, from the point of view of existential philosophy, the gameworld does not need or even cannot be objectified, externalised, and transcended in order to capture its features. Oppositely, it can be realised as reflected in the individual's situatedness. Therefore, the realisation of the self-avatar's own situatedness within the gameworld is rather a case of reflective *internalisation*[9] than externalization;

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[9] This topic can be also discussed using the term *incorporation* coined by Gordon Calleja, defined as "the player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated through the avatar into that environment" (Calleja, 2011, 169).

as Sartre writes,

"In aesthetic joy the positional consciousness is an *image-making* consciousness of the world in its totality both as being and having to be, both as totally ours and totally foreign, and the more ours as it is the more foreign" (Sartre, 1988, 65).

This world is "discovered in a movement to transcend it" (Sartre, 1988, 65), however, this gesture of transcending – reflective or revolutionary – remains the gesture of the being situated within the world.

In consequence, the in-game *aesthetic situation* is the appointment of the self-avatar and the gameworld, when the self-avatar recognises herself as a part of the anticipated, imaginative, and aesthetically valuable wholeness. On the other hand, the acts of concretization she performs, which actualise her situatedness, make the experience of the in-game existence very different to player's external relation the character or to the artefact as it exists among other texts of culture.

Thereby, the Ingardenian notion of the *aesthetic situation* is one of the founding assumptions of *involved aesthetics* concerning single player computer games with avatar I would like to introduce. Being based on the engagement of the self-avatar in the gameplay situation, and reflection over their situatedness within the gameworld undertaken from the in-game perspective, it needs to be distinguished from the *aesthetics of disinterestedness* (Cf. J.-P. Sartre 1978, 575–76; J.-P. Sartre 1988). The aesthetics of disinterestedness considers the aesthetic stance as free, unrelated to any specific goal, and not interested in the existence or reality of the contemplated object considered to be separate from the perceiver; while Ingarden underlines the prevailingly active role of the perceiver in constituting the concretisation of the work of art, in co-creation of the way it can be perceived. Moreover, he writes that:

"We are able to *aesthetically* commune with the work of literature and perceive it in the flesh only in the form of one of its concretizations. In consequence, we deal with it exactly how it reveals or expresses itself in the particular concretization"[10].

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[10]   (Ingarden 1976, 415) . Quotation translated by author.

Acts of concretisation are accompanied with the "desire of possession of sensible qualities that touch us, which are pursued by the subject who experience aesthetically"[11]. Development of the aesthetic experience is driven by "hectic pursue for qualities able to supply the quality that touched us"[12].

Therefore, the *involved aesthetics* shifts emphasis in order to ascribe to the aesthetic perception character of creation and cognition; to grasp it in its purposefulness, multidimensionality and tangled character.

This approach results in the departure from a traditional understanding of the aesthetic as founded exclusively on the special value of the contemplated object, experiences caused by features of the object, or unusual perceptual stance; to the aesthetics of experience that is oriented in the phenomenological constitution of the aesthetic object, which is contextual and situational.

The *Involved Aesthetics* Revisited

When arguing that the in-game reflection has the aesthetic character, I adhere to an understanding of the term borrowed from the existential aesthetics and its phenomenological precursors. In reflection of Roman Ingarden, Martin Heidegger, or Jean-Paul Sartre - just to name a few - the primary metaphysical function of the aesthetic is to reveal the human being's place in the world, and express the human strife for synthesis: "the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe" (Camus 1992).

I believe that the in-game aesthetic situation is the moment of realisation of the self-avatar's position within the universe — as long as it is the gameworld they are situated in. It does not imply the awareness of a world beyond one's situation; oppositely, it implies an awareness of the world as seen through one's own situatedness.

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[11] (Ingarden 1970, 78-79) . Quotation translated by author.

[12] (Ingarden 1970, 78).

In consequence, the connection of these two spheres — existence and art — is crucial to my argument. In the gameworld, meaning is constituted by the interplay and reciprocal conditioning of the subjectivity of the self-avatar and gameworld, which includes an existential project of the self-avatar[13]. The situatedness towards *the promise* of the meaningful self and the meaningful world; the for-itself-in-itself that will satisfy the human desire of certainty; creates the point that needs to be fulfilled — or *concretized*. It therefore complies with an outline of an *aesthetic situation* in Roman Ingarden's terms.

For existentialists, the human being's sole responsibility is the creation of meaning for herself and of herself in the world, as she maintains her own existential project, while:

"…the work of art is a concrete proposition of making the world meaningful, of marking it and implementing into it certain values that it never possessed or it was stripped of them"[14].

In addition, Ingarden asserts that:

"The human being needs to crystallize something what is unfinished, what is just about to begin, because he is somehow convinced, that he is able to express himself in this object, to reveal and to externalise all the hidden, subjective processes that are not shaped yet"[15].

In consequence, I would like to set a thesis that both art and falling into *in-game* the *They* can be fuelled by a drive for obtaining a certain shape of *being,* as opposed to continuously *becoming* (Cf. Vella 2016b). Sartre characterises *bad faith* as "the flee from anguish by attempting to apprehend ourselves from without as an *Other* or as a *thing"* (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 43), and defines a work of art as "this synthesis of self and not-self (the intimacy and translucency of thought on the one hand and the opacity and indifference of the in-itself on the other)" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 577). The fullness of being that gains meaning and justification, that marks an individual and the world as existing in a particular way leads to the exposure of the truth of being as in Heidegger's or Dufrenne's

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[13] I will unfold the understanding of appropriacy of the gameworld and the existential project of the self-avatar in Chapters 2.4 and 2.5.

[14] (Mróz 1992). Quotation translated by author.

[15] (Ingarden 1981, 183). Quotation translated by author.

writings; or to a discovery of nothingness, as in Sartre (Cf. Dufrenne 1989; J.-P. Sartre 1978; Deranty 2015).

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Even though in the in-game *aesthetic situation* the subjective position is bound to the self-avatar's position, it is conditioned differently than in the *gameplay situation*. In the latter, the self-avatar considers her stance as determined and meaningful, purposeful and functional; while in the former, she reflectively focuses on the perceptual form of her own being-in-the-gameworld, the aesthetic features of the environment perceived from the certain perspective, and on the distance that emerges towards the position occupied during the gameplay. However, neither does the reflection situate the self-avatar outside the game, nor outside the self-avatar's perceptual stance. Therefore, the game is not approached as a system that can be played with, but as a way in which the self-avatar is situated. In the *gameplay situation* she experiences her in-game life, while in the *aesthetic situation* she can reflectively perceive the avatar as self and as the aesthetic object. While considering the avatar to be a self in the *aesthetic situation*, it appears to be a standpoint I can reflect upon, but cannot change or depart from. It is determined by the *They* one can tell apart from the existence, while:

"…the existence is the way of being that relies on 'reflective' turn to itself; existing being is a being that relates to its own 'to be'. However, this reflective orientation is not a matter of choice, as the existing being does not choose existence but is 'thrown' into it"[16].

From this point of view, I discover the way how my being-in-the-gameworld is conditioned in the context of wider possibilities offered by the gameworld. As long as the self-avatar becomes a part of the story, and participates in the aesthetical form of the gameworld she influences, she can consider the existential project outlined by the self-avatar to be the aesthetic project[17].

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[16] (Michalski 1998, 38). Quotation translated by author.

[17] In games employing a third-person point of view, while reflecting over my position as the self-avatar from the point of view of the *aesthetic situation*, I can perceive the protagonist as an aesthetical object being compound; not only of the perceptual perspective, biography, and a set of behaviours not controlled by the player; but also containing audiovisual form and movement.

Therefore, it becomes a moment of capturing an emerging and co-created aesthetic form of the self-avatar and the gameworld experienced from inside, where the crucial element is the subjective position of the perceiver.

In order to summarize the two preceding chapters, in the following table I have delineated the key elements of previously disussed perspectives and situations:

Perspectives	*Internal Perspective*		*External Perspective*
Situations	*Gameplay Situation*		*Aesthetic Situation*
Attitude to self-avatar	acting as self-avatar in the gameworld; looking through experiential and existential structure	reflecting over (my) self-avatar within the gameworld; aesthetic form of subjectivity shaping experience of the gameworld	reflecting over the avatar as an element of composition of the artefact; objectified and looked at
Attitude to the game	gameworld; perceived as inhabited existential environment	gameworld; reflected over in search of meaning from the perspective of the self-avatar	artefact; object in the world; text amongst other texts; specimen of a genre
Focus	acting; living an adventure within the gameworld	recognition of aesthetic form of *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness*; reflecting over the appropriacy of the self-avatar and the gameworld perceived from their perspective	interpreting the game; comparing to other games

2.3. This Dark Area between the Doors

"For one instant you were the heaven-sent mediator between me and myself,
you perceived that compact and solid entity which I was and wanted to be,
in a just as simple and ordinary way as I perceived you.
For after all, I exist, I am though I have no sense of being;
and it is an exquisite torment to discover in oneself
such utterly unfounded certainty, such unsubstantiated pride"
(J. P. Sartre 2001, 2:343–44).

"Only I do hope it's my dream, and not the Red King's!"
(Carroll 2001, 233)

The moment of interplay between the *gameplay situation* and the *aesthetic situation* opens an opportunity for the cooperation of perception and imagination in the process of playing a game; the continuous establishing and re-establishing of the self-avatar's situatedness within the gameworld, her position toward the current state of the gameworld and — self-reflectively — towards herself.

I will explore the two situations outlined in the previous chapter while close playing *The Beginner's Guide* (hereinafter as *TBG*). Due to the self-referential character of the game, the subjective position of the self-avatar within the complex gameworld of *TBG* is doubled. In consequence, this particular game is not only an example illustrating my arguments, but it also presents the multi-layered situation of the self-avatar towards the game on its own rights. In consequence, the reflective form of *TBG* allows the highlighting of not only the relationship between the gameplay situation and the in-game aesthetic situation, but also the difference between the internal and external perspectives, as it is problematized by the game itself.

I argue that in *TBG* the self-avatar is thrown into two parallel gameplay situations, i.e. it is related to a different, or even conflicted, system of interdependencies. As a result, I will delve into two levels of auto-reflection within the *TBG* that make explicit the interplay between the gameplay situation and the aesthetic situation by making both the topic of the Narrator's comments.

The first one is revealed by the introduction, as well as the loading screens appearing between the chapters of the game; as *TBG* is introduced as a composition of chronologically ordered prototypes of games divided by loading screens, supplied with the Narrator's comments that gives the game the form of a story within a story. The self-avatar is situated within the gameworld of the framing *Narrator's game*; however, she is not situated within any particular prototype. In turn, prototypes become "objectified" or "textualized" by acts situating the self-avatar beyond them. I will exemplify this by studying the *dark moments* between particular chapters of the game.

The second gameplay situation is grounded within prototypes; it is realised in the search for the aesthetic shape of the subjective stance towards the gameworld of the certain prototype, and as existential meaning of the self-avatar's position towards the almost constant mentoring of the Narrator. I will focus on the case of the door puzzle revealing "this dark area between the doors" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015) that I will interpret as the area of aesthetic reflection on the gameplay situation within a particular prototype. However, the aesthetic self-reflection of the self-avatar is altered by comments of the Narrator.

I argue that the first level mirrors the stance of the external point of view within a game itself (Cf. Chapter 2.1), while the second one plays with the self-avatar's doubled subjective position that, in consequence, is experienced as stratified, dynamic, and highly dependent on the state of the explored gameworld. Due to the oscillation between these framings, the interdependencies between the gameplay situation and aesthetic situation, as well as the co-action of internal and external perspectives become especially interesting.

I would like to underline that here I do not focus on a process of interpretation that takes place while the player turns back from playing the game to the distanced interpretation, but on a particular situatedness of subjectivity. In consequence, I will focus on the conditions of experience in particular situations, their interplay, and discontinuity.

I claim that the dualism of in-game situations does not replicate the differentiation between cybertext and text (Cf. Aarseth 1997), a game as a text subjected to two different hermeneutic circles while perceived from

the first- and third-person perspectives (Möring 2013; Karhulahti 2012a, 2012b); or as self-concentrated play as opposed to presentation performed for the external spectator (Gadamer 2004); or even hermeneutic triad of understanding game as existence, text and struggle (Möring 2013). The crucial quality of the aesthetic situation is that it embraces the way the gameplay situation conditions the self-avatar's subjectivity and reshapes this condition in self-reflective, *cogito*-like movement, which engages not only perception but also the imagination (Cf. J.-P. Sartre 2004).

The Dark Moments

When I enter *The Beginner's Guide*, at first I find myself in a *gameplay situation* which I have been thrown into. Before I can see anything more than a white screen, I am welcomed by the Narrator:

"Hi there, thank you very much for playing *The Beginner's Guide*. My name is Davey Wreden, I wrote *The Stanley Parable*" *(*Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

Prima facie, the player is welcomed as *herself* in a frame story that is presented to her, and it seems that at that moment the gameworld does not propose any special subjective stance to her. However, the situatedness she experiences now is immediately reflected upon by the Narrator. As Arsenault and Perron point out, the "experience with a game starts before the gameplay proper", and it "often takes the form of an introductory cut-scene whose main function is to regulate, modulate, take in charge, or shape the gamer's horizon of expectations" (Arsenault and Perron 2008, 119). As long as the self-avatar cannot see any cut-scene, she can literally hear the game's "primordial speech" (Arsenault and Perron 2008, 119). She just listens to the voice that outlines the situation she is about to participate. From the introduction, she can learn a couple of biographical details about the relation of the Narrator to Coda, believed to be a designer of games encapsulated within *TBG*.

Nevertheless, before she actually begins to interact with the gameworld, her position as the self-avatar within *TBG* is already gaining shape; as from the point of view of the aesthetic situation she is gradually slipping into the perspective of a coactive confidante of the Narrator, while learning his

personal attitude to the game and to its author:

"Now these games mean a lot to me. I met Coda in early 2009 at a time when I was really struggling with some personal stuff, and his work pointed me in a very powerful direction" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

Right from the beginning, *TBG* shows the self-avatar that her subjective stance is not — as distinct from the majority of computer games — the straightforwardly central one. Nevertheless, at first it is the only position she is proposed to take. In order to play, she enters the gameplay situation, and her attitude towards the world is already pointed out; she is proposed to take a guided tour through the digital worlds of prototypes encapsulated in *TBG*. This situatedness needs to be experienced in order to establish a ground for any kind of reflection.

The Narrator elaborates on the obscurity of the prototypes, while at the same time he highlights their — declaratively present — deeper and consistent meaning hidden from the self-avatar. In fact, without the framing story, the prototypes and mini-games they consist of could be mistaken for the first steps of a fledgling programmer. Nevertheless, the prototypes are not the main attraction of the game, as the Narrator uses them in the construction of a more complex wholeness; he addresses and instructs the self-avatar, or advises Coda, the absent designer of prototypes; however, above all he presents his own interpretation of the current situation of the self-avatar within the prototype.

In consequence, even when the self-avatar is not situated within any particular prototype, she still participates in a frame story enacted by the Narrator's comments and interpretations. I believe that during these *dark moments* between the prototypes; i.e. the situations experienced as *being beyond* the prototypes (Cf. J.-P. Sartre 1978, 549); the self-avatar is still situated within a gameworld as a subject being guided by the Narrator. Therefore, the situation outlined by the *TBG* mirrors the stance of external perspective within a game itself.

The self-avatar is repeatedly informed that the challenges she faces are made easier and more understandable for her, while those contained in the

original version of the game known only to the author and the Narrator were practically unsolvable. Davey modified Coda's prototypes in order to remove unmanageable situations and make them playable. Before the improvement, prototypes were private, paradoxical, non-playable games, unknowable worlds designed for no-one. They present and repeat motives of prisons, towers, empty spaces and endless activities, stages and machines, and lanterns: lanterns that Davey introduces to the self-avatar at the beginning of the journey through prototypes, as a sign of consistent thought laying behind all prototypes designed by Coda:

"I can't tell you quite why but for some reason Coda fixates on this lamppost, it's going to appear at the end of every single one of his games from here on out. I'll tell you what I think, I think up to this point he's been making really strange and abstract games with no clear purpose, and maybe you can only float around in that headspace for so long. Because now he wants something to hold onto. He wants a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination! Which is what this lamppost is, it's a destination" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

The same lanterns that, as Coda reveals while addressing Davey from within the prototype entitled *Tower*, are added by Davey: "Would you stop changing my games? Stop adding lampposts to them?" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

These Dark Areas

If the self-avatar wants to proceed, even if the only challenge is to move further, she needs to act within these complicated circumstances. When she enters a prototype, her situatedness towards the frame story is supplied with the spatiotemporal situatedness within it; for example, within circumstances outlined by the door puzzle. What is the self-avatar supposed to do here?

"Well this is new for Coda, it's an actual puzzle! Go ahead and see if you can solve it. Alright, let me just walk you through it. You're going to hit the switch on the outside to open the door, then hit the same switch and walk through the door before it closes. You'll see a second switch on the inside, which will open the second door. Don't forget that solution, because we're going to see this puzzle again soon. We're going to see it a lot. So that seems to be it, right? You walk

down a corridor, you solve a puzzle, you get to the end. Simple enough" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

When the self-avatar looks at the door puzzle from the point of view of the gameplay situation, it seems to be trivial; the doors are here to be opened, and the self-avatar has been instructed how to do it; therefore she can easily remove the obstacle that shows up in front of her.

However, this is not all that constitutes the gameplay situation at the moment. In *TBG*, the exploration of these simple, three-dimensional locations perceived from the first person point of view is just a first layer of my situatedness. It is not only the gameworld open of exploration and puzzle solving, but also a gameworld that uses the position of the Narrator to force a certain interpretation of the situation of the self-avatar (what in other games usually happens by means of obstacles and penalties, achievements and upgrades being a part of the gameworld). The situatedness of the self-avatar becomes a part of the self-reflective game that problematizes not only the meaning of the self-avatar's actions undertaken in order to solve the door puzzle, but also a relation between the Narrator and the self-avatar to the place and time of events (Cf. Ryan 2001). When the self-avatar acts within the certain prototype, her actions are 'explained' by the Narrator. Therefore, the self-avatar is relieved or rather deprived of her attempts of self-reflection and aesthetic approach to her own stance. Hence, the experience of falling — being guided by the situatedness and treated as an object within the world — is made explicit and analysed.

By doing so, this self-reflective game uncovers the relationship between the *gameplay situation* and the *aesthetic situation*. In games that do not delve into themselves, the difference between the two can be easily tracked as a difference between direct statements, for example: 'the doors are in front of me' in *the gameplay situation;* and 'I need to open the door in order to go further and finish my quest'; or 'I am the one opening the door' in the *aesthetic situation*. In other words, the difference between them is analogical to the difference between pre-reflective and reflective observations in terms of outlining levels of consciousness (Cf. E.g. Husserl 1970). In consequence, the subjective stance of the self-avatar reflecting over herself is not abandoned, but realised — altogether with its falling condition and patterns of acting

that constitute the self-avatar. However, the regular self-reflection differs from the reflection over the position of the self-avatar, not only because the latter subjective position can be abandoned without any serious consequences; but primarily because it is a reflection over the compound, the self-avatar that is a concretization of subjectivity performed by the player and considered as herself-in-the-gameworld.

In *TBG,* the situation is even more complicated due to the presence of the second layer of the gameplay situation, established by a relationship between two non-player characters, Coda and Davey, the Author and the Narrator — or perhaps between one, schizophrenically split character. The interplay between the two systems of interdependencies alters the self-avatar's understanding of her situatedness by reflecting on what she has just done. The statement: 'I am able to open the door' has a certain meaning within a gameplay situation outlined by the prototype, but it also gains new meaning, and potentially consequences, within the *Narrator's game*. In consequence, the self-avatar wonders 'what does this opening mean within the framing story?', and 'how does it shape my current position and role?' As the Narrator comments on the door riddle:

"At the end of this level we're going to see the puzzle again, and here I'll tell you what I think the puzzle means. Each of these games represents an idea that was on Coda's mind at the time that he was making it. And the puzzle is a way of closing the door on a previous chapter of his life before moving onto the next one. In each of his games, after exploring a theme that he might find difficult, Coda can place this puzzle that he knows has a reliable solution, he understands exactly how it works, and so it gives him a simple mechanism for moving on. And because there's this dark area between the doors, a space between spaces, before you move on you get to pause just for a moment a few seconds to reflect on and let go of the events that lead you here. To step back and connect the pieces together, to grasp at that elusive bigger picture. And then you face the next thing" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

Therefore, this dark area is presented as the isolated space designed for the self-avatar to ascertain her position. However, due to the double situatedness that I have already pointed out, it seems to work in an opposing manner. It reveals a lack of the subjective space for the self-avatar, as every spottable place is already occupied by the Narrator's interpretation. The door puzzle is then not only a repeatable, trivial obstacle occurring while the self-avatar

moves through the prototype in the *gameplay situation*; an element of the *aesthetic situation* while the self-avatar reflects over herself as performing the actions; but is also one of the crucial moments of the framing story that reveals the self-avatar's situatedness within the Narrator's plan to present the prototypes as an expression of existential struggle of the Author.

From the point of view of the *aesthetic situation*, "this dark area between the doors" is an example of altering the self-avatar's situatedness towards the perceived environment by problematization and re-interpretation of the subjective position. The aesthetic situation reveals a dissonance within the self-avatar's experiences, as she encounters messages in the prototypes in parallel to their conflicting interpretation enunciated by the Narrator, who — as a part of the gameplay situation — determines and limits the self-avatar's subjective position within a gameworld when interfering with prototypes the self-avatar is situated in.

Lost between Dreams

The "dark area between the doors, a space between spaces" is a standpoint that reveals an abyss: when the self-avatar reflectively realises that the gameworld she is situated in — as well as herself within this world — are her own concretizations. The act establishing a game already perceived from the perspective of the self-avatar as an aestheticized gameworld is then performed from inside this gameworld.

This paradox cannot be answered from any point of view because it infinitely references back to the interplay between the two. To understand the self-avatar's situatedness, one has to act within it. On the other hand, the conditioning and limitations of this subjective position are understandable only as reflected upon. Therefore, as Sartre argues, the mediator — the individual one, as the Narrator, or the non-individual one, as the *They* — is necessary to embrace this duality:

"This self with its a priori and historical content is the essence of man. Anguish as the manifestation of freedom in the face of self means that man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence. We should refer here to Hegel's statement: *'Wesen ist was gewesen ist'*. Essence

is what has been. Essence is everything in the human being which we can indicate by the words — that is. Due to this fact it is the totality of characteristics which explain the act. But the act is always beyond that essence; it is a human act only in so far as it surpasses every explanation which we can give of it, precisely because the very application of the formula 'that is' to man causes all that is designated, to have-been. Man continually carries with him a pre-judicative comprehension of his essence, but due to this very fact he is separated from it by a nothingness" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 35).

For the same reason, the reflective moment between the prototypes cannot be long, and the dark area between the doors cannot be inhabited. The Narrator in *TBG* comments on the situation with his customary authoritativeness:

"Of course, it can't last. The music stops, your companion is gone, it's time to leave! The door at the top of the hill is now open as well. Again, you can't stay in the dark space for too long. You just can't, you have to keep moving, it's how you stay alive. Which is the whole point of the puzzle doors, right? That sooner or later you have to pick up and move. I really thought that was the point of it" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. and Wreden 2015).

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The *aesthetic situation* — while revealing the conditions of experience of the *gameplay situation* — becomes the moment when the aesthetic form of the gameworld experienced from inside can be captured. Its crucial element is the subjective position of the perceiver, the self-avatar. The self-reflectiveness of *TBG* makes the *aesthetic situation* more complex. First of all, the game is composed of separate prototypes that are framed by the story, and dark areas, loading screens, when the self-avatar is nothing but a listener. Secondly, the comments of the Narrator that prevent the player from unaided acts of interpretation — as they do not leave space for agency — and from the self-reflection, by making the player "interpassive" (Žižek 2002). I believe that both layers of the *aesthetic situation* in *TBG* are governed by the "relationship of substitution", as Žižek calls it when pointing out at the function of "canned laughter" in TV series: "This is what the Lacanian notion of 'decentrement', of the decentred subject, aims at: my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized, I can literally 'laugh and cry through another'" (Žižek 2002).

Nevertheless, in *TBG* the decentralization is overwhelming. This is the Narrator who tells the self-avatar what she should think of the *gameplay situation* she is in. He also alters or doubles the in-game *aesthetic situation,* while co-shaping it and moving it to a different level. In consequence, the self-avatar is not reflecting over her own position as the self-avatar in the gameplay situation taking place within a prototype, but reflecting over the gameplay situation as mediated by the self-reflective comments of the Narrator. Therefore, the self-avatar's reflection on situatedness in *TBG* is explicitly shaped by the *They* incorporated by the self-avatar and multiplied by the Narrator.

TBG, while making this processes explicit, illustrates the function I will describe in the next chapter; namely the *They* inscribed into the game. This Heideggerian term designates a general structure of obligations and behaviours perceived by an individual as natural and — non-reflectively — obvious. In *TBG*, if the self-avatar is about to hesitate, the omniscient voice and gaze of the Narrator quickly supports her with explanations of what she is expected to think or to do. Paradoxically, this is the single-player game realised by somebody else's agency. The self-avatar is brought into the relation between Davey and Coda, who surprisingly speaks up in one of the final prototypes. However, he does not comment on the self-avatar's actions, but criticises the Narrator's; moreover, he directly addresses the Narrator, not the self-avatar. The final moments of the game make it clear; in this gameworld, the self-avatar is not only bereaved of the central place, but is refused any meaningful position.

2.4. *Spirit of Seriousness* and *Bad Faith*

> "Perhaps there is no other choice; perhaps one has to choose:
> to be nothing, or to play oneself. It would be horrible:
> such a natural falsehood"[1].

A *gameplay situation* takes place when the game is perceived as a meaningful and autonomous world in which the player is situated[2], and is opposed to the point of view external to the gameworld, which considers the game to be an artefact. Therefore, the process of meaning-making, and the experience of significance; which are the primary interests of the present chapter; are grounded in the point of view internal to the gameworld. The player's perceptual perspective within this world is defined by an avatar experienced as self, i.e. *the self-avatar*, and its position within the gameworld. *The gameplay situation* includes the realisation of the existential project of the self-avatar, which acts within the gameworld and is subjected to in-game constraints. From this perspective, the player's activities motivated by the events she encounters in the gameworld are perceived as meaningful through their relation to: a) the gameworld, or b) the self-avatar's attitude towards them. Therefore, the gameplay situation is in many ways analogical to a life situation. The latter is a system of relationships between an individual, a world, and facticity; that is, according to Sartre (Sartre 1978, 512), the individual's position in the world determining her point of view.

In the following pages, I argue that the meaning of in-game activities is rooted in *bad faith* (See: Sartre 1978, 44–45, 47–70, 628; Leino 2012a) and *spirit of seriousness* (Sartre 1978, 39, 580, 626–27, 633). Jean-Paul Sartre uses these terms in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1978), to name two different defence strategies used by individuals to ease the tension of responsibility. They are described by Sartre as misleading and harmful beliefs about the individuals' position in the world, and about the source of meaning of their actions. *Bad faith* is a form of intended self-deception that makes a person believe that their role in the world is determined; however, they are not able to completely

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[1] (Sartre 2005, 140; Cf. Sartre 1992, 227). Quotation translated by author.

[2] Therefore, in the *gameplay situation* the player does not relate to the game as an artefact or a text that can be misread, freely interpreted or compared to other games.

forget about their projective nature. On the other hand, the *spirit of seriousness* is a conviction that meaning of the world is not dependent on an individual project, but inscribed into objects. Therefore, in a life situation, *spirit of seriousness* and *bad faith* conceal the fact that human beings are free and fully responsible for their existential project. However, when introduced into game analysis, I argue that they describe a perceptual framework provided by a self-avatar when experiencing a gameworld. In consequence, instead of being the characteristics of a morally flawed struggle with individual freedom, they become a part of the aesthetic form of the being-in-the-gameworld approached in the aesthetic situation.

The argument is accompanied by an interpretation of particular moments in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (hereinafter *VoEC*) which will be interwoven later in the text, after the theoretical exposition of the problem. The gameplay situation is here outlined by the gameworld, where the self-avatar is a detective with supernatural powers who tries to solve the mystery of a missing boy, Ethan. He considers actions that lead to this goal meaningful because he was called to decipher messages and clues hidden in the gameworld.

How, then, do the meaning-making process and the experience of significance change in a *gameplay situation* when compared to a *life situation*? In order to answer these questions, I compare the meaning of *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness* in situations of life and a game. Firstly, I need to mark a condition and features of an individual's position in the world within the framework of Sartrean philosophy. I will outline how meaning is created in a life situation, and ways it depends on the overall existential project of the individual, and on her attitude to the world. Consequently, I will apply the underlying assumptions of Sartre's ontology to a gameplay situation, in order to explore how such meaning relies on the position of a self-avatar and her attitude to the gameworld.

Free Human Beings in an Absurd World

What does the process of meaning-making entail for human beings? In the existential philosophy of Sartre, the world lacks meaning. Therefore, the world is not able to support meanings the individual gives to her life.

Not only is she completely free to start the process of meaning-making, but is also completely responsible for who she is and how she acts. Sartre presents freedom-oriented extremism claiming that the meaning of life is a matter of individual choice: "All these trivial passive expectations of the real, all these commonplace, everyday values, derive their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world" (Sartre 1978, 512), he writes. It is a matter of the particular existential project, whereby every individual meaning-making is grounded in freedom.

The Sartrean understanding of freedom is far from the everyday use of the term. Here, freedom is not understood as a possibility of choosing from the options presented. For example, I decide to become an actress, a diver, or, a philosopher. Freedom is understood as "a relation to the given" (Sartre 1978, 486), namely as a possibility of negation - Sartrean freedom constitutes the fundamental characteristics of the human being in the world. This absolutisation of freedom makes every single decision and action a consequence of conscious decision one has to take responsibility for. It also justifies the Sartrean claim that the human being is nothingness, and cannot cease to be free (Sartre 1978, 485–86).

Therefore, a human being might not have essence, but has experience of never-ending longing for something it was in the past or wants to become. While an individual is nothingness; a chasm in being which, because of its otherness, is able to freely interact with the world; the world is indifferent to fullness and being. Therefore, it is not possible to answer the question "what is the meaning of a tree" without reference to the individual human being. The particular tree can be considered as a source of inspiration or as firewood — its meaning is dependent on the project one connects with the tree. It is therefore freedom which constitutes meaning of the world: intentions, actions, and their interpretation.

Nevertheless, human beings always find themselves within the indifferent world as being thrown (Sartre 1978, 39) into a particular situation they are facing from a particular point of view. Sartre adds that:

"Each man finds himself in the presence of meanings which do not come into the world through him. He arises in a world which is given to him as already looked-at, furrowed,

explored, worked over in all its meanings, and whose very contexture is already defined by these investigations" (Sartre 1978, 520).

This involvement of consciousness is facticity:

"Without facticity consciousness could choose its attachments to the world in the same way as the souls in Plato's *Republic* choose their condition. I could determine myself to 'be born a worker' or to 'be born a bourgeois'. But on the other hand facticity cannot constitute me as being a bourgeois or being a worker. It is not even strictly speaking a resistance of fact […]. Facticity is only one indication which I give myself of the being to which I must reunite myself in order to be what I am" (Sartre 1978, 83).

By establishing an individual's relationship to the world, facticity does not take away the burden of freedom. Even if the conventional deed is experienced as motivated or imposed upon by demands of the particular situation, it needs to be freely chosen by the individual as her own way of acting. Therefore, any act becomes justified by itself; it does not become better, worse, innocent, or meaningless. Moreover, the individual cannot cease to take full responsibility for this act.

In Sartre, an understanding of the individual's own, unconditioned nothingness and inescapable freedom is then the only source of deep and authentic sense of meaning. Additionally, being aware of this freedom causes anguish as nobody and nothing is given as just meaningful (Sartre 1978, 29–34). Sartrean existentialism is the philosophy of difficult freedom since it considers an individual as absolutely responsible (See, e.g. Sartre 1978, 509; Dilman 2013, 199). In consequence, as he writes in *Roads to Freedom*, "Everyone! Everyone! Everyone runs away: Schwartz veers away, Nippert sleeps, and Pinnete goes mad […]. Each of them quickly doctored for himself an attitude that will help him to survive" (Sartre 2005, 585). All of these "life-giving" meanings derive from bad faith; they are believed in for their calming effect. The hardship of bearing responsibility for freedom is the reason for a common presence of defence mechanisms: bad faith and spirit of seriousness. They conceal freedom and anguish, and help individuals to perceive their actions — as well as the surrounding world — as justified and meaningful (Sartre 1978, 556).

Sartre argues that "[f]or the spirit of seriousness, for example, bread is desirable because it is necessary to live (a value written in an intelligible heaven) and because bread is nourishing" (Sartre 1978, 626). I think that a clue to this attitude can be exemplified by two forms of sentences. A man, in spirit of seriousness, will express his experiences by the features of objects and say: "*It* is understandable, edible, perceivable"; while the one conscious of his freedom will articulate his attitude towards the world in active form, *"I* can understand, eat, perceive". As a *serious* individual objectifies meanings and values, he believes that everything demands a particular handling and should be approached only in this "proper" way that suits its nature.

The *bad faith*, in turn, is an answer for a desire to be determined by and limited to a performed role. It is a false, but convincing, answer the individual gives herself for longing for one's proper and unchangeable place in the world. Bad faith is a special form of self-deception when a person performs a role she knows, recognises or even considers to be her *real nature*, and at the same time she tries to conceal her own conviction that it is just one of possible relations to the given. "It is in my nature, I always do that", or "I'd love to help you, but it transgresses my eligibility" are two examples of utterances formulated from the point of view of bad faith[3].

The two strategies, *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness*, will be explained more comprehensively with appropriate examples from *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*.

There is no Place for the Absurd in *Spirit of Seriousness*

> "My freedom? It hangs over me: I am free for so many years
> and nothing comes from it. I am dying with desire to exchange
> this freedom for doubtlessness, just once"
> (Sartre 2005, 99).

Do the defence mechanisms of *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness* work

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[3] The term *bad faith* has been applied to games by Olli T. Leino. It will be discussed later on in the text.

in a gameplay situation as they do in a life situation? If they do, how are they manifested? Building on the Sartrean ontology of the human condition, I will make an attempt to outline the situation of the self-avatar in the gameworlds of adventure games, characterized by an absence of the condition of losing a game. In other words, the players' experience of this type of game can be more or less extensive due to their activity within the gameworld, but there is no possibility of failing.

I would like to limit the application of the Sartrean ontology to this genre, as narrowing the field will allow me to explore it in more detail. Consequently, I will focus on *VoEC*, the adventure game with a "singular embodied ludic subject-position, […] where the player is given a single playable figure, with her relation to the gameworld being structured entirely through her engagement with this figure" (Vella 2016, 5). The gameworld is perceived from a first-person perspective, and is realised as a three-dimensional environment. Firstly, I would like to highlight the differences between the Sartrean world, into which human beings are thrown, and the gameworld they voluntarily and willingly throw themselves into.

The game, before I run it, is for me an artefact, or an object in the world (Cf. Aarseth 2011, 59–60; Leino 2010, 273). I am free in relation to it: I can turn it on and enter a gameplay situation, or choose not to. When I make a decision and enter the gameplay situation, I feel that an adventure begins: the adventure desired so badly by Roquentin, a protagonist of *The Nausea* (Sartre 2007). According to Sartre, an adventure is "a way of happening" where "life" and "story", "living" and "telling" are intertwined (Sartre 2007, 36–37). While having an adventure, a person experiences her life as if she were the protagonist of a fascinating story. She takes part in the events, but is not the creator of them – everything just falls into place, but actions do not cause the adventure, nor determine its course.

Sartre writes that longing for an adventure can never be fulfilled in life, as the world lacks meaning; it is absurd and excessively complicated. However, since the gameworlds of the games in discussion do not share with reality the quality of "having too much content" (Sartre 2007, 107); i.e. offering more possibilities than can be ever experienced; they are potentially reconcilable with human consciousness. Moreover, the gameworlds of adventure games

usually offer self-avatars central roles[4].

Therefore, despite the place I find myself in as I start *VoEC* looks pretty realistic, I expect the moment to be the real beginning that can never take place in life — as "[r]eal beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity" (Sartre 2007, 37). When the self-avatar turns back, he notices an entrance to the tunnel. Led by curiosity, he runs inside — what will he find on the opposite side of the tunnel that he just, apparently, left? He runs in the darkness to find himself back in the same place. He can hear his own voice explaining that he is in Red Creek Valley in the world where Ethan Carter had vanished. From these first moments of the game, he learns that unknown evil gathers here. There are portals connecting different worlds: a realistic, sensual one; and a second, mysterious and dark one. Due to the detective's paranormal powers, he is able to reconstruct the occurrence of past events by touching significant items encountered in the woods, houses, and graveyards. The self-avatar's inner speech informs that "to find Ethan, I had to figure out what this place is trying to hide from me" (The Astronauts 2014). Therefore, the game introduces the player to a different facticity: a new facticity in the world where abandoned buildings are inhabited by dark forces and murder weapons, which when arranged in proper places, have the power of turning back time, and allowing the player to witness crucial stop-motion scenes from the crime.

If it were a life situation, I would have to make a free decision concerning what to do, but I think that a gameplay situation provides an escape from the necessity of taking responsibility for an individual's actions and choices. To participate in a gameplay situation I need to follow clues hidden in the gameworld. The meanings are already here. As a result, I think that adventure games could fulfil the longing for doubtlessness, which is one of the basic human needs from the point of view of Sartrean existentialism. In a gameplay situation,

"Each of my choices, every act of intentional direction toward the world is morally and

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[4] I will discuss games that play with this central position in the Part 3.

ontologically well-grounded, it has vital justification coming from outside. Therefore, all the relationships (self-world, self-things), meanings, values, senses are not created by my freedom […], but are given to me as already established order"[5].

This is how Piotr Mróz described the *spirit of seriousness,* which supports an individual's belief that the meaning of life can be derived from, or even inscribed into the world. It leads to the conclusion that rules and meanings observed and experienced in the world, only because of their presence, define and justify individual endeavours. In the *spirit of seriousness,*

"Man pursues being blindly by hiding from himself the free project which is this pursuit. He makes himself such that he is *waited* for by all the tasks placed along his way. Objects are mute demands, and he is nothing in himself but the passive obedience to these demands" (Sartre 1978, 626).

The meaning of an individual's actions are then perceived by this individual as given by the features of the world - as being derived straight from the facticity.

In a life situation, according to Sartre, the individual and a world are on opposite poles: they are the two kinds of being which are as different as possible. Consciousness, or human freedom, undertakes endeavours to conceal this fact. In order to feel safer, she tries to humanise the world, to make it both understandable and meaningful. This is why everything, that which is given, such as socially and culturally set meanings, are usually perceived as "natural things" (Sartre 1978, 427).

I think that a gameplay situation does not constitute such poles: there is nothing absurd and there is no freedom, as they stay behind the scope of the gameplay situation. The moment I make the decision to turn the game on, then becomes the moment I enter the self-avatar's facticity in the gameworld[6]. Every player will find themselves in this facticity, and their situation will be determined by it. They will find the set of in-game meanings with

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[5]   (Mróz 2007, 783). Quotation translated by author.

[6]   For the notion of an *extended facticity* see: Leino 2010, 11,187, 220-1, 282.

no relation to their individual freedom, but related to the self-avatar instead. As long as the self-avatar is inextricably bound to the experiential structures of bad faith and spirit of seriousness, it exists as a project realised within the gameplay situation. Hence, it is not simply experienced as the player's self, but as an emergent entity. In consequence, as the self-avatar is defined by her situatedness within the gameworld, the player's freedom cannot simply be transferred to her new situatedness.

The self-avatar, just like a human being in spirit of seriousness; "is *waited* for by all the tasks placed along his way" (Sartre 1978, 626). However, there is a major difference between the two; a free individual deceives themselves not to be the authoring meanings they ascribe to the world, while the self-avatar reflectively realises that the meaning of the gameworld is a part of her project within it — its aesthetic form. The gameworld supports a sense of meaning and purpose of actions the gamer takes, as it affirms and rewards proper performance. Moreover, it sustains a conviction that the obstacles offered by a gameworld are "mute demands" (Sartre 1978, 626) designed to mirror the abilities of the self-avatar[7]. In actual fact, they are.

At this point I would like to refer to Olli T. Leino's assumption that games exercise the existential freedom of the player[8] by imposing on her the "gameplay condition" (Leino 2009; Leino 2010; Leino 2012b) defined as follows:

"The condition of the player, who by definition desires to play, is characterized by a duality of freedom and responsibility: the game gives her a freedom of choice while simultaneously making her responsible for this freedom by resisting her project of playing" (Leino 2012a).

I believe that games open new areas for the player to exercise freedom in, but only when they are considered from the external perspective; i.e. when

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[7]   For the notion of *hybrid intentionality*, where "The hybrid intentionality originating in the symbiosis of the game artefact and the player is directed at the extended facticity", Leino 2010, 187, 277; See also: Vella 2014.

[8]   The freedom is here understood differently than; for e.g. in Caillois, as it is not as much connected with action, but with the relisation of the existential project within given circumstances, Callois 2001, 6.

the subjective position within the gameworld is bracketed. From the point of view internal to the gameworld, games create obstacles as well. However, not the kind of obstacles against which *my own* freedom can be exercised (See: Leino 2010, 130–31). It would be the case if the gameworld were an absurd world, where human endeavours are unjustified. However, when approached from the in-game point of view of the gameplay situation and subsequent reflection on it, the gameworld offers the human different situatedness. As a human being I never cease to be free; albeit, while acting as a self-avatar I reject my existential freedom to act within the situation outlined by the gameworld. The gameplay situation creates an opportunity to conceal the player's freedom, as it sets the limit for *her own* meaning-making. This is the consequence of the kernel of the gameplay situation, where the absurd gameworld is not hidden beneath the *spirit of seriousness* of the player: there is no absurd and indifferent world in the game.

The gameworld, as perceived from the perspective of the gameplay situation, is not absurd, but purposeful. Its meaning is experienced as inscribed into it; hence it can be perceived as factual while adopting the position of the self-avatar. Even if meaning experienced at a particular moment is limited to some kind of expectation or atmosphere, all the gameworld exists to create this ambiance. From the point of view of the aesthetic situation, the spirit of seriousness is reflectively discovered to be a part of the experiential structure of the self-avatar, which is an aesthetic form of her situatedness within the gameworld.

While playing *VoEC*, every single interactive item effectively contributes to the meaning of the gameworld. The self-avatar follows paths that lead him to places he should visit in order to reconstruct the turn of events; to recount memories of past events hidden in the gameworld. There are no dead-ends, but also no hints. The game warns the player in the very beginning: "The game is a narrative experience that does not hold your hand" (The Astronauts 2014); but even a sheet of paper lying on the table of the abandoned house, filled with childish hand-writing, tells a short story illustrating the mystery the player attempts to understand. Within this gameworld, the self-avatar can be sure that every piece of half-burned newspaper found in the forest contains some information crucial to his mission or contributes to the meaning of the gameworld, and his actual task

is to find the way to all the meaningful places and arrange all the elements in the proper order. Letters and voices, spells, and mysterious portals are all building logically and narratively-consistent wholeness around the self-avatar.

Moreover, *VoEC* also makes use of several innovative ways to support my *spirit of seriousness*. Instead of being informed about actions I should perform to *fulfil expectations* of the gameworld, I am led by suggestions in a form of cloud-based question tags. While getting closer to any important object, I can choose to investigate it. For example, when approaching a railway car I can see questions – "Blood… Human? Animal? Murder? Used recently?" (The Astronauts 2014); The representation makes an impression that the questions the detective should ask himself were already present in the gameworld, and awaited him hidden in the investigated object. Therefore, they do not refer to a story which happened in the past, but to the self-avatar's current position towards this object, and signs of the crime the player can perceive. When I look around, the cloud of questions is getting denser as I get closer to the meaningful point at which I will find an answer. However, when I look in the wrong direction, the cloud of questions spreads itself out.

(The Astronauts 2014. Screenshot taken by the author)

(The Astronauts 2014. Screenshot taken by the author)

Last but not least, the most interesting facet of the *VoEC* world are flashbacks from the past. When I manage to collect and put together all the objects necessary to reconstruct the scene of the crime, and "touch" the body of the victim, I will be given the stop-motion moments of the crime. When I set the events in the right order, the special gift of the self-avatar that uncovers mysterious meanings hidden in the objects within the gameworld will allow me to see the cut-scene with dialogues revealing a part of the mystery of the vanishing of Ethan Carter.

The gameplay situation, as opposed to a life situation, provides an explanation of actions I need to take. It imposes a meaning of the situation into which I am thrown as self-avatar. Who, then, is the actor of the in-game endeavours, on whom are these meanings imposed, and whose actions are justified?

I, Self-Avatar: Acting in *Bad Faith*

> "I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn't mine anymore,
> but one in which I'd found the simplest and most lasting joys"
> (Camus 1988, 104).

In the life situation, a source of meaning of an existential project is always a human being. Individual meaning-making is then performed "from inside", even if the justification of one's actions is erroneously ascribed to the world. In the framework of Sartre's philosophy, the need for meaning and personal *destiny* can never be satisfied without concealing freedom. The human being in the world is always *in statu nascendi*; due to her ontological status, she never achieves final shape, and cannot aptly attribute to herself a kind of meaning that non-human objects and others have. This causes an anguish; a feeling of groundlessness that needs to be helped.

"This desire, to act like a mechanism driven by external causes, to become only and solely one's single function, a trait, a role, is one of the forms of *bad faith*, or in other words, one of the ways the human being escapes its freedom" (Mitoraj 2005, 768).

The term *bad faith* designates here a conviction that one is determined by and limited to a performed role, and intentionally forgetting that it is not true. *Bad faith* is a form of false and powerful self-identification of free human beings; when they lie to themselves about their own condition, and are victims of this lie at the same time (Cf.: Sartre 1978, 49). People acting in *bad faith* are best illustrated by characters in Sartre's *Roads of Freedom*: Brunet, who has "joined up, he had renounced his freedom, he was nothing but a soldier" (Sartre 1992, 155), the bartender who "was rather *too much* the bartender" (Sartre 1992, 227). Therefore, it takes place when a human comes to believe that she *is* her role, an object or mechanism that cannot be changed nor modified. "Perhaps there is no other choice; perhaps one has to choose: to be nothing, or to play oneself. It would be horrible: such a natural falsehood"[9], wonders Mathieu Delarue who is obsessed with freedom.

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[9] (Sartre 2005, 140; Cf. Sartre 1992, 227). Quotation translated by author.

I argue that when approaching a gameplay situation one has a choice; namely, not to enter an unfolding gameplay situation, or to *self-constrain* and act as a *self-avatar*, that is, to play somebody one is *not.* Therefore, bad faith can be explained not only as a description of a misperception of the human condition. In a gameplay situation, bad faith characterises the self-avatar's condition as such. As a result it is unavoidable, as long as the player wants to participate in the gameplay situation. When the player accepts the self-avatar's position as herself, she perceives it in a "subjective relation of self" (Vella 2014), and is able to reflectively realise the self-avatar's condition. This way, the point of view of the self-avatar participating in the gameplay situation; i.e. her situatedness within the gameworld; constitutes a basis for meaning-making in a game.

At this moment a question arises; can this existential frame still be called *'bad faith'*, if the self-avatar actually cannot be anyone else, as there is no place for freedom and authenticity within the non-absurd gameworld as approached by the situated self-avatar? I believe that it is, as it is not a matter of any particular choice made within the gameworld. The reason is a construction of the self-avatar; a composition of the object and subject, aesthetic form and existence, that is bound to the proposed form as it concretises the gameworld through its agency.

The self-avatar cannot become "anybody else"; however, she can cease to be "herself". Moreover, it happens continuously, as the player shuffles between internal and external position towards the gameworld, and between gameplay and the aesthetic situation. The self-avatar can leave her current situatedness, which makes her herself in relation to the gameworld, by abandoning her position towards the gameworld and ending the gameplay situation.

Moreover, reflection over the self-avatar from the point of view of the aesthetic situation is not just a reflection over self, which takes the position of avatar, undertaken by the player addressing the game. The self-avatar, as long as it is a compound of the avatar and existence, is in bad faith, because when acting in the gameplay situation, the subjective position they take limits and frames their subjectivity. However, due to the interplay between the gameplay situation and the aesthetic situation, when reflecting over their position from within the gameworld, they approach it as the aesthetic form

of the self-avatar. In turn, when the self-avatar and its bad faith is approached from the external perspective, the player's existence abandons its in-game situatedness and refers to their freedom, authenticity and situation in the 'actual' world. In the gameworld there is no place for nothingness outside the frames drawn for existence by the self-avatar. It fulfils the desire of being self-object: to become for-itself-in-itself and suspend their freedom, that cannot be fulfilled in life.

Therefore, the notion of *bad faith* supplies a framework of the gameplay situation with the characteristics of an actor. As long as the player acts as a self-avatar, she does not experience a game as related to *her own* freedom. In consequence, the process of in-game meaning-making does not take place between an in-game facticity and freedom of the player, but refers to the objectified role of the self-avatar the player identifies with.

A different use of the Sartrean concept of *bad faith* was proposed by Olli T. Leino (2010, 161–63; 2012a). However, Leino applies the notion to a situation external to the gameworld, and constructs thought experiment to depict a specific situatedness of the player towards the artefact:

"If I was the reluctant player held at a gunpoint, and excluded the possibility of choosing not to play, and begun playing just because 'I had no other option', I would be engaging in what Sartre […] calls bad faith. […] If held at gunpoint most of us would probably resort to any available escape. However, closing one's eyes when faced with a problem would not be good if we, […] accepted authenticity as a challenge common to humans" (Leino 2010, 161–62).

He also proposes another side to *bad faith*, where it is not connected with the situation completely independent of the addressed game, but relates to the moment of ceasing the activity of play:

"Play, not unlike any other activity, can be ended at will. However, we can, and often do play in bad faith — that is, as if we had no option to stop. "I have gotten this far, I cannot stop now" or "I have to help my guild members, I cannot stop now" can both imply an attitude of bad faith" (Leino 2010, 162, footnote).

The first two examples provided by Leino outline conditions independent of situatedness within the gameworld, while the third addresses the situation

within the gameworld as interpreted from the external point of view. However, none of them refer to the situation of the self-avatar within the gameworld I concentrate on. Moreover, I believe that the first quotation rather refers to the *spirit of seriousness* described above, and that the second one contains two different cases. Therefore, I will exemplify the differences between the forms of *bad faith* with four sentences:

1. Leino's "reluctant player held at a gunpoint": "I play, because I am forced to play" — The meaning of the situation is ascribed to the state of the world, i.e. being held at a gunpoint, and not to the self-perception of an individual. "I" refers to the player, and a constraint is external and independent from the gameworld.

2. Leino's player who conceals that she can end the game at will:

a) "I have to play, but I should have already finished" — "I" refers to the player, and the sentence refers to her inner struggle. However, her willingness to play and her limitations are rooted in life situation.

b) "I feel obliged to play because of my duties within the gameworld" — A conflict arises between the player and the self-avatar, as "I" refers to the player, while "my duties" are the self-avatar's duties.

3. The perspective outlined in the presented text — "I am Paul Prospero, hence I have to find Ethan Carter" — A limitation inscribed into the self-avatar. As the constraint stands within the gameworld and does not reach the player's life situation, it is unavoidable as long as the gameplay situation lasts. Even if the player is not particularly interested in searching for the boy, all the decisions taken in the gameworld are situated towards this quest.

To sum up, one can observe that the concept of *bad faith* can be applied not only to the situations outlined by Leino, but also — accompanied by the concept of *spirit of seriousness* — to the in-game gameplay situation. Moreover, from the in-game point of view there is no escape from them, as they are built-in features of the self-avatar.

Let me use an example from the *VoEC*. What does it mean that within the gameworld I am in *bad faith*? I perceive the gameworld from a first person perspective. At the beginning of the adventure, the self-avatar is then almost *carte blanche* - just a point of consciousness. During the gameplay, I develop an understanding of a self-avatar also as a character and embodiment. As self-avatar, I find myself in the woods of an uncanny Red Creek Valley.

At first, I become a listener of my *inner monologue* that outlines my situatedness and shapes my perspective[10]. The voice of the narrator — that is, *my* thoughts — create a synchronic commentary for the situation I am in; it unfolds my in-game situatedness. As an experienced private eye investigating dark cases, the self-avatar – Paul Prospero experienced as self – is the detective who has solved many cases from the border of criminal and mystery. I answer a call from a missing boy, Ethan. I take the role which is proposed to me. Until now, in relation to the gameplay, I will be — as the self-avatar — *just a detective* looking for Ethan Carter, no matter how successful I am in my endeavours.

Even if I cease to fulfil my duties within the gameworld, the self-avatar will still be addressed as Paul Prospero. I will keep my supernatural powers of seeing the past enclosed in the objects' memory. Even if I do not want to follow the gameplay and prefer to concentrate on an appreciation of the environment's aesthetic, I perceive it as and through the self-avatar. No matter how hard I try to avoid portals leading to the mysterious parallel world, I cannot cease seeing them as Paul Prospero does.

At the beginning of the game, I encounter a trap that from the point of view of the self-avatar, seems to be set especially for the visitor curious about the mysteries of this place. I become more careful and start to search for the next dangers hidden among the trees. After a while, I find a faded bonfire. As a detective I immediately notice a scrap of paper that provides me with a snippet of information about the crime I am tracking. If the self-avatar were a forester, not a detective, she would probably think of poachers trying to capture a big animal when encountering a trap. She would check if the bonfire is cold and does not pose the danger of fire, and perhaps try to track down people who lit it in order to fine them.

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[10] For the model of player-figure relation, including inner dualism of an avatar figure, see: Vella 2014.
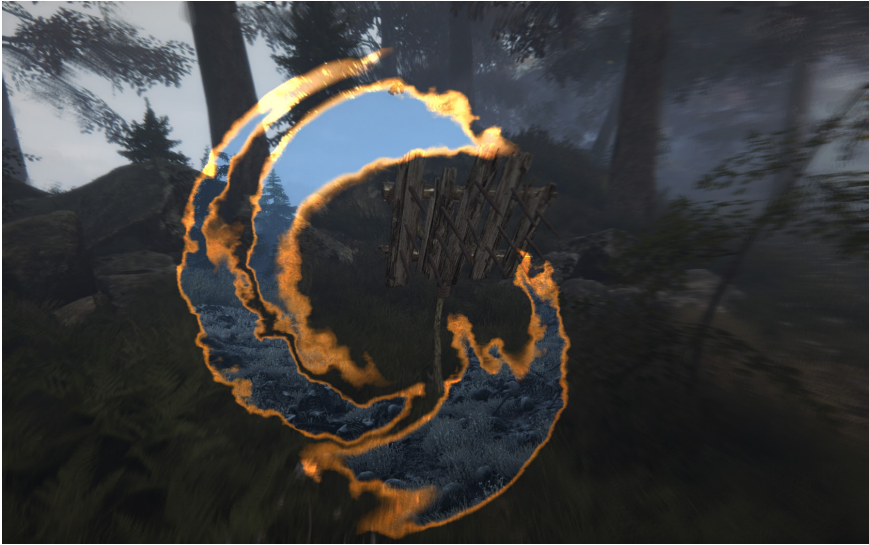
(The Astronauts 2014. Screenshot taken by the author)

(The Astronauts 2014. Screenshot taken by the author)

Therefore, the self-avatar provides me with an existential precondition for understanding my situatedness within the gameworld. *Bad faith* constitutes its shape and makes me maintain and develop an understanding of my own position. As I gather information about the self-avatar and learn to act within

it, I gradually realise that there is no other subjective stance proposed to me within the gameworld.

The importance of *bad faith* can also be illustrated by contrasting two persons entering a crowded café. The detective will take a seat that enables him to cast surreptitious glances at the suspect he is following, while the barman will notice the contents of the glasses held by the customers. The barman from the Sartrean example, who is "overly a barman" (Sartre 2005, 140), makes every gesture a barman's gesture, referring to his conviction of himself as a barman. His behaviour is led by his bad faith, its appropriateness is set by the facticity of being a barman. Analogically, the player thinking of herself as a self-avatar and acting as one is looking at the gameworld in bad faith; searching for what "just a detective" would search. Therefore, in a gameplay situation my actions are performed in the context of a mission I execute; that is, in a context of their relevance to the project of the self-avatar, my adventure, and destiny.

In a life situation, the meaning of a barman's gesture is falsified by his *bad faith.* He can at any moment gain the awareness that he is a free human being. He can potentially quit his job, cease connecting the meaning of his actions with his role, and keep living his life.

In opposition to life, taking on this particular project of the self-avatar is justified by the gameworld which is composed around her facticity. When a player enters a gameplay situation, her self-avatar always appears in the gameworld at a perfect moment and in an ideal place. She keeps playing a central role in the gameworld[11], as the gameplay becomes a fulfilment of this particular project, and its changing facticity continuously supports its justification.

To experience an adventure, I act in *bad faith* as a self-avatar. I act in the *spirit of seriousness* while looking for justification of my acts in the gameworld. Therefore, in a gameplay situation in adventure games, "I am not 'making myself' against the artifact as it exists, but assuming that there is a 'plan for my existence'" (Leino 2012a). Leino calls this approach a "utilitarian mode of interpretation":

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[11] For the central role of the player in cybertexts, see Aarseth 1997; for philosophical commentary on the central role of a player in a gameworld in the form of a game, see Gualeni 2013.

"While the utilitarian inauthentic attitude certainly is useful for me as a player, it distorts my interpretation, as it in fact implies a version of the "authorial intent fallacy" (Leino 2012a).

As long as I consider an experience of a gameplay situation, I do not interpret the game as an artefact, but as a world that is expected to be meaningful. However, I do not think that it requires any further assumptions on a designer's intentions; they can be expressed only in the gameworld the player interacts with, as long as she holds the position inside the gameworld. Moreover, while the *distortion* of my interpretation can be harmful for research of an artefact, it seems to be crucial not only for playing a game, but also for describing the player-avatar's perceptual position inside the gameworld, and for examining a gameplay situation.

When the player quits the position of bad faith, the gameplay situation is disturbed. The avatar is not perceived as self anymore as the player jumps off her avatar and assumes a different attitude towards a game: she perceives it as an artefact, not as a world. She henceforth addresses a different situation. The game is not experienced as a field of living and acting, and becomes an artefact perceived from an external perspective. The adventure disappears and is reduced to a simple story; something that happened once upon a time and exists as having already been told, the unreachable memory (Sartre 2007, 36–38). Therefore, the proposed application of Sartrean ontology is limited to a gameplay situation, when the player objectifies herself in the avatar acting in bad faith, while perceiving herself as being "just an avatar". As long as I perceive the unfolding gameplay as my own adventure, my gaze is merged with the gaze and agency of my avatar; I can act as the avatar, and think of myself as the avatar. The gameplay situation remains a personal experience of the different meaning of in-game life - the different self in the extended facticity.

On the Appropriateness of the Gameworld and the Project of the Avatar

In a life situation, human beings are able to reject *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness* and authentically take responsibility for their freedom. On the other hand, in a gameplay situation of an adventure game they are not; as long as *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness* provide a perceptual frame for the player, and she consistently follows the gameplay. The meaning of in-game life is experienced in the *bad faith* when the player acts as a self-avatar; and in *spirit of seriousness,* as one perceives meaning as being given to them. Therefore, in a gameplay situation, the player is able to experience suspension of freedom, and take delight in the lack of responsibility. When I assume the position of the self-avatar in *bad faith*, the gameworld becomes meaningful to me in light of the project of my avatar. The facticity of this world and appropriateness of the avatar's project causes the world to be experienced in the *spirit of seriousness* as meaningful, fulfilling expectations, and justifying my endeavours.

2.5. The Adventure

> "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute
> illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama.
> But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply
> that it is to be immediately satisfied"
> (Camus 1991, 17).

> "I do not know whether the whole world has suddenly shrunk
> or whether I am the one who unifies all sounds and shapes:
> I cannot even conceive of anything around me being other than what it is"
> (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 54).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in a philosophical novel entitled *Nausea,* describes an *adventure* as the "way of happening" where "living" and "telling" are intertwined (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 36–37). While having an *adventure*, a person experiences her life as if she were the protagonist of a fascinating story. However, according to Sartre, longing for an adventure can never be fulfilled in life.

However, I believe that the adventure becomes possible when an individual gets involved in situations such as those discussed in the preceding chapters. In order to explore the idea of adventure, I examine *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009)*;* two games that from the external perspective can be classified somewhere between the walking simulator, the adventure game, and notgame genres. In both games, the player's agency is limited to choosing a direction of the exploration, and the gameworld unfolds in front of them with minimal effort.

Freedom for Sartre is a basic characteristics of human being, and a synonym for an attitude of consciousness referring to an absurd world, which constitutes a basis for individual sensemaking. Therefore, sensemaking is not a privilege but a necessity, as nothing can be taken for granted. In consequence, an experience of suspension of existential freedom remains unachievable, but the most desirable escape from a responsibility caused by the lack of any metaphysical anchorage inscribed into the human condition.

I make an argument that the *gameplay situation* can be considered a real-time, prereflective adventure happening in a limited world and experienced as the self-avatar. The ontic situation of the *being-in-the-gameworld* (Vella 2015, 55) enables the special "way of happening", and, in consequence, the *player's freedom* is experienced as suspended when she acts within the gameworld; however, it does not limit the *self-avatar's* ability of taking choices and acting within the gameworld.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the *aesthetic situation,* the adventure is recognised as a moment of suspension of freedom when the self-avatar — acting consensually with the *They*, in *bad faith* and *spirit of seriousness* — follows the promise of meaning she recognised within the gameworld.

Nausea: Live or Tell

The protagonist of *Nausea*, Roquentin, wanders aimlessly through the streets of Bouville, where little is happening. He witnesses normal, everyday life: there are no special emotions, no perceivable meaning, no spectators nor listeners. From the first-person perspective, Roquentin experiences a chaotic set of sensations and mundane activities. His life has "too much content", but there is nothing special in it, it is never named nor interpreted in real time. While trying to write a biography of Marquis de Rollebon, Roquentin gradually realises that life cannot be aptly described (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 12–13, 39).

While reminiscing on his past, Roquentin dreams of an adventure, speculating on how it might begin:

"The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity" (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 36).

When the adventure begins, life becomes infused with meaning; it engages the listener just like a melody. An adventure surprises Roquentin with unexpected situations; it offers him a major role in a well-composed

wholeness[1]. When the adventure happens, it provides the feeling of acting in a stream of meaningful events, instead of struggling to make sense of an absurd world. The human takes part in these events, but is not the creator of them – everything falls into place, but actions do not cause the adventure, nor determine its course.

Roquentin laments that the adventures he remembers from the past cannot be repeated:

"Following this gold spot with my eyes I think I would accept-even if I had to risk death, lose a fortune, a friend-to live it all over again, in the same circumstances, from end to end. But an adventure never returns nor is prolonged" (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 37).

Adventures, then, cannot be relived; but he hopes that new ones could happen. Roquentin can only wait for them to take away the burden of needless freedom.

For Roquentin, the experienced string of life events is not the adventure, because life causes *nausea*, as there is always more happening than he needs. Roquentin suddenly realizes that the adventure emerges only when we perceive life from the distance of time, but in reminiscence;

"…we forget that the future was not yet there; the man was walking in a night without forethought, a night which offered him a choice of dull rich prizes, and he did not make his choice" (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 37).

The adventure is a special quality of happening that seems to make life meaningful and fascinating. Unfortunately, it becomes available only as a recollection; and even then, the adventure lacks immersion and feels somewhat falsified:

"This is what I thought: for the most banal event to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens

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[1] Sartre follows the Aristotelian definition of the wholeness in drama: "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Aristotle 2008, vii; Cf. Laurel 1993).

to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story" (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 38).

He tries "to live his own life as if he were telling a story", but never succeeds because life takes place in an absurd world; any choice is more justified than others, and, the worst of all, there is no need for a protagonist. All the meaning he can find is of his own creation, and any meaningful order of events is just reminiscence. Therefore, an actor cannot say what will be important for a future story in a certain moment: while the action takes place, everything is equally important.

Moreover, the man living in an absurd world is also "condemned to freedom" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 485). On one hand, one cannot cease to be free by their own will, as freedom cannot dispose itself. Therefore, they are absolutely responsible for every choice they make, a choice that cannot be justified by anybody else's decision, any event, any external system of values; while on the other hand, the human being is always situated and is not able to abstract itself from the world he was born into. Freedom then, is unbearable and necessary: it is synonymous with the human condition, consciousness, nothingness and non-identity (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 78–79, 85, 95, 102, 125, 181, 201). Freedom can only be ostensibly escaped from in the *They*, *bad faith, spirit of seriousness,* as discussed in Chapter 2.4; and in the arts and storytelling, which mount certain propositions "of making the world meaningful, of marking it and implementing into it certain values that it never possessed or it was stripped of them"[2].

Storytelling gives some relief from the burden of freedom. Events, when narrated, gain special meaning; they gain reason. As opposed to life events, they become interesting and promising, they are understandable. Literature therefore saves the reader from the absurdity of Sartre's world, and the condition of necessity of making sense of it. Literature, the Arts, the imagination and memory provide an escape to the irreality zone where everything is meaningful; where there is no room for existential dilemmas induced by the external situatedness of the perceiver, and requiring choice and

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[2] (Mróz 1992). Quotation translated by author.

decision, which suspend freedom. Nevertheless, the seemingly perfect world of irreality and storytelling also has its faults: it fails to give an opportunity for first-hand experience. The major fault of the story is the lack of agency and real-time dimension[3]. Furthermore, the beginning is dependent on the ending, as Roquentin explains:

"In reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 38).

According to Roquentin, adventures happen in books, where even mundane activities seem to be happening in this special way; but in books they cannot be participated. Adventures are parts of biography, not life, but nevertheless, Roquentin still wants this "way of happening" – the meaningfulness built into events, not imposed on them *post factum*:

"I had imagined that at certain times my life could take on a rare and precious quality. […] I have suddenly learned, without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. And naturally, everything they tell about in books can happen in real life, but not in the same way. It is to this way of happening that I clung so tightly (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 36).

He also wants to preserve the interactivity and chronology of events that make them surprising, and to make motivated and justified choices.

The Insider's Point of View

Now I will examine two games; *Dear Esther* by The Chinese Room (2012), and *The Path* by Tale of Tales (2009); in search of Roquentin's adventure. I limit my argument to single player games, mainly because in the early work of Sartre, the meaning of the world and particular events do not stem from the interaction between human beings, but from the individual consciousness

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3   Marie-Laure Ryan claims that immersion in literature excludes interactivity and vice versa. However, I think that good examples of interactive literature could be provided by postmodernist novels that play with the position of the reader; and examples of immersive texts could be found amongst XIX century novels (Cf. Ryan 1999). I also identify a problem with interactivity in Chapter 2.3.

intentionally - and potentially creatively - directed towards the world (Cf. J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 75; 1978, 79–84). Both examined games take place in explorable, three-dimensional environments characterised by limited interactivity and lack of hard challenges, while the protagonist wanders in search of her adventure.

The interpreted titles do not include the condition of losing that would expel the player from the game. The real-time dimension; so important for the adventure; is not disturbed by the necessity of replaying any difficult moments. On the contrary, it is supported by discovering the narrated events hidden in the world, one by one, where the impression of living in the unfolding tale is very strong. Therefore, the player's choices do not make them responsible for the continuation of the game.

Nevertheless, there is an opening and closing of the process, and consequently, a beginning and ending of conditions that distinguish *Dear Esther* and *The Path* from toys or simulations. The ending determined by the narrative outlines the course of the gameplay, but reaching it is not dependent on the player's choices. Therefore, I argue that this kind of gameplay is structured as an aesthetically designed Sartrean "way of happening", which can be experienced as real-time adventure.

As long as I consider the adventure to be aesthetically valuable way of happening, when the events create a meaningful process arranged around the central character, I need to concentrate on the *gameplay situation* and its characteristics from the point of view of the *aesthetic situation*. I will outline how the three elements — the gameworld, the self-avatar, and their relationship — enable an adventure to begin and make it possible to be experienced from the perspective internal to the gameworld.

Hereby I start a philosophical experiment to examine the ways the player could "risk death, lose a fortune" or "a friend", and fulfil his longing for reproducible adventure. I hand a gamepad to a desperate existentialist and ask her to play. The *gameplay situation* the self-avatar finds herself in when she becomes involved with the gameworld and acts within it will then be interpreted from the reflective point of view of in-game *aesthetic situation*.

Dear Esther: The Infection

The protagonist of *Dear Esther*, the Nameless, wanders through one of the deserted islands in the Hebrides archipelago. The self-avatar starts her adventure by surfacing from the sea. From time to time, she encounters a random part of the monologue, and the island is imbued with meaning. Not much is happening here, but she begins to live her life in a meaningful environment. It encourages the self-avatar to follow a well-composed string of events. Therefore, the opening of the game is the beginning of an adventure that becomes an exploration of the lonely island.

The self-avatar is able to act and change the state of the in-game environment. Therefore, it cannot be characterised as an unreachable Sartrean *irreality* (J.-P. Sartre 2004, 183–85), but rather as a different kind of world. Additionally, the situation of being an "exile in the midst of indifference" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 508; Cf. Leino 2010, 130–32), as Sartre characterises the human being's situatedness within the world, is changed in the game; as the existential project of the self-avatar within the gameworld is perceived as meaningful from within the gameplay situation.

The self-avatar expects some kind of destination of the journey; a quest that will make it purposeful. However, this craving for synthesis encapsulated in an unknown ending does not determine her understanding of the ongoing adventure, the overall meaning of the exploration. In *Dear Esther,* events are experienced in the chronological order of life, and accompanied by monologues which contain fragments of streams of memories - lacking internal temporal order -and detached comments on the explored island. The ending is also unable to determine the choices of the self-avatar because the only choices she can make define the direction of the exploration; there are no winning conditions, just exploration "enabling players to move through narratively compelling spaces" (Jenkins 2004, 121). The only way to quit the existential project of the self-avatar outlined by the gameplay situation is to terminate or finish the game.

But what makes the lonely island in *Dear Esther* the "narratively compelling" space experienced as supporting "this way of happening"? In Sartre's philosophy, the world contains no stories, it is absurd. It means that

it interrupts people in acting freely by creating resistance in a meaningless and indifferent way. In the *gameplay situation,* the resistance is experienced differently; i.e. as meaningfully shaping the experience of the player. In consequence, the characteristics of the gameworld differ from the everyday world, and the being-in-the-gameworld is different from being-in-the-world. I find that these differences bridge a gap, and enable the interrelation of the poles of the dichotomy of "live" and "tell".

The island in *Dear Esther* is the map, rather than a territory, a signifier rather than the signified (Cf. Saussure 2011; Aarseth 1997), because memories of the protagonist are inscribed into the island, in the exploration of its space, which is the adventure area. In one of the opening monologues, the Nameless says: "I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island" (The Chinese Room 2012). The island is the signifier that gradually becomes one with the self-avatar's body; and in the following monologues the body is confused with the island, the internal story with the explored territory. In consequence,

"[T]o explore here is to become passive, to internalise the journey and not to attempt to break the confines" (The Chinese Room 2012).

The internalisation becomes clearly visible from the external perspective, as the game is a composition of four chapters; and every consecutive one shows a more clearly depicted internalisation of the self-avatar's pilgrimage. The scenery gradually becomes less realistic, suggesting the multidimensional character of the exploration. Events are influenced by the perspective of the end.

(The Chinese Room 2012. Screenshot source: dear-esther.com)

(The Chinese Room 2012. Screenshot source: dear-esther.com)

In this case, three realities are interwoven by the insistent topic of infection killing the self-avatar. The voice acknowledges that "the infection is not simply of the flesh" (The Chinese Room 2012), it spreads through all the levels, connecting the exploration with the biography of the protagonist, and opening the adventure area.

The first level is the narrated memory of the car accident; with motifs

of the city, road lamps, a drunk driver, and the corpse of Esther. It is the "mental infection" caused by the car accident: "I have become an infected leg, whose tracking lines form a perfect map of the junctions of the M5" (The Chinese Room 2012).

The second level that can be tracked here is the monologue about embodiment and illness, which connects memories with the present moment: kidney stones, and the infection of the leg reaching his heart.

The third infected level is an exploration of the lonely landscape of the island: "I am travelling through my own body, following the line of infection from the shattered femur towards the heart" (The Chinese Room 2012). All the contaminated layers of the game are interwoven, and their internal complexity is discovered through the spatial exploration and constant movement between the subjective positions.

The biography of the protagonist is inscribed into the island, and the self-avatar experiences it as her own monologues suggesting that she is talking to herself, not knowing what she is going to say next, as memories come from outside the self-avatar's own experiences. There is no clear and visible analogy between the exploration and the meaning of the encountered story, no causal relationship showing the aim of the self-avatar's actions, or the way they lead to the conclusion. The end is not visible yet, they can experience the lifelike events in the space of the biographical story (Leino 2010, 287; Calleja 2007, 124); it is a surprising adventure, as its meaning is not created, but discovered in the gameworld.

The Suspension of Freedom

I believe that the gameworld can be considered an *improved reality* on Sartre's absurd world; providing the self-avatar with a feeling of meaning. Making in-game life meaningful is profoundly connected with spatial exploration, which enables the self-avatar to collect scraps of the story and contextualize them. Nevertheless, elements of the narrative are not necessarily established within the place or time that is actually explored. In consequence, the meaning of the adventure is not created by the actions of the explorer,

but is inscribed into the world. Sartre describes this type of meaning not created by the individual's consciousness, but present in the world as "human transcendence":

"As soon as I avail myself of the opening marked 'Exit' and go out through it, I am not using it in the absolute freedom of my *personal* projects. I am not constituting a tool by means of *invention*; I do not surpass the pure materiality of the thing toward my possibles. But between the object and me there has already slipped in a human transcendence which guides my transcendence. The object is already *humanised*; it signifies 'human control'" (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 427).

The gameworld contains only *human transcendence*; it is always under *human control* or *humanised*, because it does not have an underlying layer of meaningless objects. Therefore, for the same reasons, considering the Sartrean paradoxes of freedom, the game environment can be interpreted as *limited reality*. If the constitutive feature of the everyday world is absurd; and there is always more happening than human beings need and are able to understand; the never-ending challenge for the individual is making sense of something. However, when the gameworld is encountered as already meaningful, not just generally *humanised*, but also composed around the particular self-avatar, it becomes a sphere of narrated biography with a subjective place for the self-avatar: the living protagonist.

The ontic dimension of freedom in the everyday world is founded on the constant conflict between consciousness and the world that lacks any internal order or meaning (J.-P. Sartre 1978, 508). Moreover, freedom is realised by making sense of the world by undertaking the individual's own existential project. However, the gameworld already contains the project for the self-avatar's existence, and it does not lack the internal order; in consequence, the freedom of the player is experienced as suspended, as long as she acts as the self-avatar within the gameworld.

Consequently, I argue that the self-avatar's freedom must be suspended in order to experience the adventure within the gameworld; in the *gameplay situation*, in order to find this "way of happening" sharing some features with "live", which is experienced as a stream of accidental, personal impressions gained by exploration; and some with "tell", the closed way of happening

of narrated events. His in-game life then becomes an *alterbiography*, defined as "the story generated by the individual player as she takes action in the game", as opposed to "*scripted narrative*, referring to the pre-scripted story events written into the game (Calleja 2011, 115).

What, or who, is the self-avatar during the gameplay in the non-absurd world?

The Path: This is my Adventure, this is not my Story

Both examined games encourage exploration accompanied by a mood of anticipation. The reward would be the moment when events "arrange themselves around you like a bouquet of flowers, without your taking the slightest trouble to do anything" (J.-P. Sartre 2007b, 148). When interpreting *Dear Esther,* I have focused on the meaning of the gameworld; while close playing *The Path* I am going to concentrate on the perspective of the self-avatar.

The Path begins by asking the player to pick one of six characters to start the journey. The game is based on the classical fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*. The little girl's goal is then - easy to guess - to reach her grandmother's house. The one sentence sets the only rule and goal of the game: "Go to grandmother's house and STAY ON THE PATH" (Tale of Tales 2009).

The promise of the adventure emerges, revealing the end goal that gives meaning to the whole experience. Following the rule however leads to disappointment, as Little Red Riding Hood arrives safely at the grandmother's place just to find herself back in the room that she originally left. The gameplay situation turns out to be very different to how it seemed at the start. Little Red Riding Hood is expected to disobey the rule to meet her adventure, and encounter her wolf in the woods.

The full extent of the adventure offered by *The Path* is not limited to the *gameplay situation* experienced from the point of view of one character, nor single completion of the game. Therefore, the experience embraces not only the subjective position of Little Red Riding Hood inside the gameworld, but also the moment when the player chooses one of the girls in the room

as her self-avatar to explore the woods; because in order to experience the whole adventure, the player needs to walk all six Little Red Riding Hoods through the forest.

The journey through the forest is re-playable with different self-avatars, and for each of them the exploration reveals different meanings. All of them share the mood of horror: winning the game, and unlocking the secret rooms are connected with painful memories of the self-avatar. If she is successful in her endeavours, the prize is encountering the wolf — the creature or person embodying her fears. What happens to the self-avatar is not explicit, but after the cutscene showing Little Red Riding Hood with the wolf, the screen darkens. The self-avatar is transported back to the path, and wakes up lying in front of the grandmother's house. Moreover, the better result is obtained in collecting the self-avatar's personal fears in the woods; the worse nightmare will be encountered in the grandmother's house. Inside the house, the perspective changes — the self-avatar is transmogrified into a form of disembodied gaze wandering among surreal, dark images; different for each of the Little Red Riding Hoods.

The agency of the self-avatar in *The Path* is not strictly connected with control over the figure. When the interactive object appears in sight and the self-avatar approaches close to it, the only way to interact with the object is by doing nothing, as the rule is as tricky as the command to stay on the path. When the player lets Little Red Riding Hood act as she should according to the *They*, she will place in her basket an item-mark of the adventure, which will appear in the grandmother's house in the final scenes of the game.

The control over the self-avatar's agency also temporarily takes the Girl in White, the ghost-like character encountered sometimes in the forest. She approaches Little Red Riding Hood and starts playing a hand-clapping game. When the self-avatar continues the game and does not interrupt the hand-clapping, the Girl in White assumes control; she takes the self-avatar by the hand, and guides her back to the path, which leads to the grandmother's house.

(Tale of Tales 2009. Screenshot taken by the author)

(Tale of Tales 2009. Screenshot taken by the author)

The game plays with the self-avatar: following the rules makes it impossible to start the game, active interaction with the environment has no effect, and in crucial moments the control over the self-avatar is taken by the *in-game* the *They* (Cf. Chapter 3.3). In consequence, the game makes an impression

of a double mediation. The self-avatar becomes *interpassive*, as she feels that "the object itself […] 'enjoys the show' instead of me, relieving me of the superego duty to enjoy myself" (Žižek 2002). In consequence, the self-avatar is relieved from the necessity of taking voluntary action, as the default action is performed as it should be performed when she withdraws.

The self-avatar then has limited agency; the game allows her to act to some extent, but a great part of activity is displaced onto the *They*, the perceptual structure incorporated into her subjectivity (Cf. Chapter 3.3). The player departs from her external situatedness and realisation of her own existential project, in order to take part in the in-game adventure. Choices made in the gameworld are valid only in this particular gameworld, and do not make her responsible in a wider, existential context.

***

Roquentin, just like anyone, can find his adventure within the gameworlds of single-player games. He can wander purposefully through the deserted island, or through the dark forest while experiencing his adventure. Roquentin can also experience the life-like events in the space of the biographical story of somebody else; he discovers the meaning of this surprising adventure by acting within the framework of the *gameplay situation*.

The in-game adventure shares some features with "living", which is experienced as a stream of accidental impressions, and some with "telling", the closed way of happening of narrated events. The examined games promise meaningful endings that determine their course, but reaching it is not dependent on the self-avatar's choices. Therefore, they can be considered to be an aesthetically shaped way of happening that suspends freedom of the self-avatar. I think that experience of this way of happening constitutes a Sartrean adventure.

Roquentin experiences the gameworld as an *improved reality*, providing him with a meaningful environment; or *limited reality*, when it suspends his freedom of creating meaning of the world. The connection of the object, the avatar, with the Roquentin's freedom creates the *self-avatar*. Therefore, the perceptual perspective of the adventurer is limited, but the position he takes relieves him from uncertainty.

I think that "this way of happening", the adventure, is possible when the relationship between *subjectivity* and *reality* changes in the gameplay situation. The experience of the *gameplay situation* would constitute a real-time adventure lived in a designed world that is not absurd. The adventure is experienced by the *self-avatar,* whose situatedness and existential project is encountered as already established within the gameworld. In consequence, the player's freedom in its existential dimension is suspended; when she acts as the self-avatar, her responsibility is limited to the gameworld, as she is choosing from the designed set of possibilities. The self-avatar can proclaim; just like Brunet, one of the characters of *The Age of Reason*, who believes that one performed role can fulfil his life: "Nothing can now deprive my life of its meaning, nothing can prevent its being a destiny" (J.-P. Sartre 1992, 1:155).

Part 3. Uncomfortable Situations

3.1. An Awkward Perspective[1]

> "If you name the behaviour of an individual, you reveal it to him; he sees himself"
>
> (Sartre 1988, 36).

> "As long as you move forward, you'll be walking someone else's path.
> Stop now, and it will be your only true choice"
>
> (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

Games can evoke an uncomfortable feeling by suggesting that it is not the self-avatar who is the agent in the gameplay situation. I will interpret such a game, Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013), and focus on the way it instructs and evaluates the self-avatar's actions. *The Stanley Parable* does not use the assessment to award the player with points, hail her performance, or prompt the next step she needs to perform in order to win the game. On the other hand, the evaluation presented in the form of the Narrator's comments in *The Stanley Parable,* makes the subjective position of the self-avatar within a game problematic. In consequence, the game makes her self-consciously focus on the limits of her agency within the gameworld, usually by questioning her choices and manipulating her into strange positions.

In *The Stanley Parable,* the self-avatar wanders through a panopticon of office corridors. She tries out multiple variants of Stanley's story, while choices she makes are described as "obedience" or "disobedience" to the Narrator of the game.

I would like to take a closer look at the discomfort caused by an impression of being continuously observed and corrected by the game. Is the game here still enclosed within the frame of the gameplay situation? Or does it auto-reflectively displace itself to become a game of reinterpretation of the self-avatar's position within the gameworld, towards the character of Stanley, and the omnipresent narrator?

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[1] Some parts of this chapter were previously published in Polish as Kania 2017b.

In order to answer these questions, I will focus on the process of breaking the fourth wall in *The Stanley Parable*. While not only addressing the self-avatar but the player herself, it breaks the safety barrier of the *magic circle* of the gameworld (Huizinga 1980, 10, 77; Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 95).

How does the gameworld experienced from the point of view of the gameplay situation bring about questions concerning the game itself, or the ground the game takes place in? Is it limited to the self-avatar's interactions with the gameworld, or does it extend beyond it? Then, spanning outside the gameworld, it depends on constant reinterpretations of the player's position; towards the avatar, the character, the narrator, or even the gameworld as a whole. Therefore, it is interpreted not only as the game taking place in the gameworld, but also as the game taking place between the self-avatar situated within the gameworld, the Narrator, and the player interpreting it from the external perspective as a critical text; despite being reached from inside the gameworld. I will therefore focus on the multiplication of the subjective positions of the player in *The Stanley Parable*.

Being *inauthentic*

As outlined in the previous chapters, within the gameplay situation the self-avatar pre-reflectively perceives herself as being-in-the-gameworld. She experiences an *adventure* that makes her actions meaningful, independently whether the self-avatar is a virtual body seen from the third-person perspective, or the first-person "point of agency" (Vella 2016).

When the player accepts the subjective perspective proposed by the game, the spectrum of their choices is usually outlined by an already designed set of possibilities. From the phenomenological point of view, their being-in-the-gameworld can then be characterised by the Heideggerian notion of *inauthenticity*:

"'Inauthenticity' does not mean anything like Being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world; the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein with of Others in the 'they'. Not-Being-its-self [*Das Nicht-*

es-selbst-sein] functions as a positive possibility of that entity which, in its essential concern, is absorbed in a world. This kind of not-Being has to be conceived as that kind of Being which is closest to Dasein and in which Dasein maintains itself for the most part. So neither must we take the fallenness of Dasein as a 'fall' from a purer and higher 'primal status'" (Heidegger 2001, 220 [176]).

Inauthenticity is then a mode of being, when a person — or a self-avatar — entirely engages in fulfilling supposed expectations of the world. It is neither secondary nor incorrect, and when applied to the situatedness within the gameworld, is based on engagement in the gameplay. Therefore, the self-avatar's experiential position while in the gameplay situation is characterised by *bad faith*, as argued in the second part of this book. The *bad faith* is possible as far as it is simultaneously an experience of falsification and double play. The player "knows just a little" that her endeavours are only a game, but plays it seriously.

The dissonance within the self-avatar can be revealed by errors of the artefact that alter the gameplay situation or close it; when the player consciously sets their own goals; or they do not follow the goals set within the gameworld in order to undertake analysis of the gameworld or text of the game (Cf. Aarseth 2007). It can also be revealed by the self-referential character of the game that appeals to their freedom by pointing out at interplay between the internal and the external perspectives (Cf. Sartre 1988).

These appeals are similarly formulated by Sartre and the Narrator of *The Stanley Parable*, when they dictate: "Whatever you do, choose it!" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013; Cf. Sartre 1988, 54). In other words, you and only you are responsible for your actions, even if the decision was suggested or even forced by somebody else, or they seem to be justified by the situation itself.

Anyhow, you do not have a choice…

Stanley, a modern anti-hero, is introduced to the player in the first minutes of *The Stanley Parable*, a game created by The Galactic Cafe. The word "introduced" borders on exaggeration, as Stanley seems to lack any specific

qualities. The Narrator focuses on the characteristics of Stanley's workplace and description of his job. He was employed to push buttons he was ordered to push; nothing less, nothing more. The Narrator suggests that others could find his job "soul rending" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013), but Stanley finds himself happy, and is convinced that he was destined to have this job.

The problem arises when, one day, the orders cease to show on a screen of his computer. This is the moment when the player takes control over confused Stanley. From now, as the self-avatar, she can explore the corridors and open the doors from the first-person perspective.

Nevertheless, the narrator's voice does not quieten when the introduction ends, and the self-avatar quickly realises that — as the self-avatar — "he knows that he is *seen* at the moment he *sees* himself" (Sartre 1988, 37). While alternately addressing the player external to the gameworld, and Stanley the self-avatar, the Narrator comments on the current positions of both. He also talks about himself as the Narrator — the omniscient, having control over the gameworld where the self-avatar is just a novice.

Stanley, as seen by the Narrator, is afraid of making any decisions; he is afraid of responsibility:

"What if he had to make a decision? What if a crucial outcome fell under his responsibility? He had never been trained for that!" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

The narrator guides the self-avatar by advising her what she shall do by commenting on the future events, on Stanley's movements before they are actually performed, and even on Stanley's thoughts. The self-avatar feels and seems to be obliged just to bring them into existence by pushing buttons she is ordered to push, and press them long enough. Stanley "got up from his desk and stepped out of his office", and "Stanley decided to go to the meeting room" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

The gameplay situation disturbingly resembles Stanley's job, as described by the Narrator in the *primordial speech of the game* (Arsenault and Perron 2008, 119). As the player observes her own interactions with the game from the point of view external to the gameworld, she is doing nothing different

than pushing — good or wrong — buttons. The outlined situation also bears a striking resemblance to the *inauthentic modus of being*, as described by Heidegger. Furthermore, the Narrator makes it explicit while loudly stating the requirements it sets for the self-avatar.

The experience of being controlled by the watchful Narrator is legitimised by his obnoxious, never-ending comments, and the self-avatar's observations unveiling the fact that Stanley's life took place in panopticon. Their most obvious verification is a hall featuring a Mind Controlling Device composed of screens displaying the offices of all the employees, which directly references the construction of the panopticon designed by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century (Cf. Foucault 1995, 195–230).

(Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013. Screenshot source: thestanleyparable.wikia.com)

The feeling of alienation caused by the constant presence of the self-reflective level of the game are visible from the first decisions taken within *The Stanley Parable*; such as when the self-avatar stands in front of two doors, and the Narrator hints that Stanley has already chosen the one on the left. If the self-avatar turns right, she immediately hears the irritating sentence: "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013). As Stanley, the self-avatar is expected to know how to get to the meeting room, hence the Narrator takes her behaviour for insubordination against his plan. The game is playing

subversively by constantly hinting at the knowledge the self-avatar should possess, but actually does not; and constantly persuading her that she should interpret her choices in terms of fulfilling her duties. As her choices are continuously evaluated within the framework of expectations prepared for Stanley, she is therefore expected to act in *bad faith;* being just Stanley.

The Multiplied Gameplay

The next source of the player's discomfort is the multiplication of gameplay. The self-avatar begins her adventure many times, and she explores (and re-explores) office corridors while the Narrator stridently encourages her to try one more time.

What will happen when the self-avatar disobeys the Narrator this time? Her decisions, despite not resulting in the choice of one of the narrated paths, do not change the self-avatar's situatedness within the world of *The Stanley Parable*. Choices are reduced to signalling the directions of exploration of corporate corridors, and following one of the scenarios already known to the Narrator - who continuously sneers at Stanley. He comments on the emancipatory struggles of the self-avatar:

"He imagined that he came to two open doors and that he could go through either. At last! Choice! It barely even mattered what lay behind each door. The mere thought that his decisions would mean something was almost too wonderful to behold!" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

Regardless of this decision taken by the self-avatar, the Narrator's comments come in torrents. A story of the self-avatar's endeavours is led in past tense, as if it had happened millions of times before, and covers any place she chooses to visit.

How should she play, when the game actively destroys the gameplay situation, and makes the self-avatar's position closely resemble a mouse trapped in a labyrinth observed by the taunting Minotaur of a Narrator?

"What exactly did the Narrator think he was going to accomplish? When every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless, making life the same. Do you see now? Do you see that Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start?" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

The Narrator addresses the player directly with the name of Stanley, and talks about himself in the third person. This ploy not only breaks the fourth wall, but also foresees frustration caused by the depreciation and understatement of choices made by the self-avatar within the gameplay situation.

Another way to announce imprisonment within the gameworld of *The Stanley Parable* is by the use of subtitles displayed while the game is loading; rolling from one side of the screen to the other: "THE END IS NEVER THE END IS NEVER…" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013). When one of the endings is reached by the self-avatar; and in each of them Stanley is somehow annihilated; the game reloads.

The Narrator raises the ante: "Press 'escape,' and press 'quit'. There's no other way to beat this game" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013). While saying this, the Narrator bluffs– but the self-avatar is not able to know it at the moment she is listening to the Narrator's voice. The game can be "beaten" by experiencing all of its endings; hence the player can gain this knowledge only by finishing the game, and *ipso facto* perceiving the gameworld from the external perspective.

The self-avatar, I-Stanley, can stand for a while, hesitating, not disturbed by the Narrator's comments. However, this way she will not discover any different, unrestrained area. Everything is already governed by the all-seeing gaze (Cf. Foucault 1995, 195–230), everything is polluted by an impression of being vigilantly observed. In consequence, the gameplay situation is repeatedly disturbed by doubts — who plays with whom? Is the self-avatar just a puppet, whose strings are in the Narrator's hands, swinging from one perspective to another?

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In *The Stanley Parable,* the self-avatar is treated instrumentally. The Narrator plays with the gameworld, with the self-avatar locked inside, somewhere between the office corridors and the narrative dimension of the game. It internalises the interplay between the internal and external points of view by addressing the player's relation to the protagonist, calling both of them by the name of Stanley: "And yet, it would be just a few minutes before Stanley would restart the game, back in his office, as alive as ever" (Galactic Cafe and Wreden 2013).

A considerable role is also played by autoreferentiality, and the self-reflective dealing with conventions and player's expectations. Stefano Gualeni proposes the "understanding of self-reflexive video games as playable forms of critical thought" (Gualeni 2013). If the game can be interpreted as the critical statement, this particular one employs and skilfully ridicules mechanisms common in commercial games. *The Stanley Parable* concentrates on critically referring to the way games evaluate the player's actions.

The gameplay situation opens and convolutes; not so as to offer the player more interpretative possibilities, but to problematise her subjective position, role, and salience within this gameworld. At the same time, it underlines the impossibility of transgression or subversive playing — the overcoming of the inauthentic mode of being internalised as the self-avatar within the gameworld. In *The Stanley Parable* "the alternative is impossible" (Cox 2011), as all the paths and solutions are already commented upon, and therefore concretised, by the Narrator, and the player is left with the feeling of futility and meaninglessness.

3.2. Sisyphean Consciousness

> "All in all you're just another brick in the wall"
> (Pink Floyd, *The Wall*).

> "They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment
> than futile and hopeless labor"
> (Camus 1991, 119).

> "It was so ridiculous to have people stuck in one place all day,
> just using their senses, then a reflex, using their senses,
> then a reflex, and not really thinking at all"
> (Vonnegut 1999, 14).

The situatedness of the self-avatar within a gameworld as such cannot be absurd. On the contrary, it is characterised by complementarity rather than incongruity[1]. However, *the feeling of the absurd* can be encountered as an aesthetic feature elicited by particular games that consistently deprive the self-avatar of gratification, and purposefully evoke the experience of futility. In the following pages, I will trace this in gameworlds which evoke disturbingly familiar places — offices, houses, customs departments — and frame them as dystopias as perceived by ordinary people.

The absurdity of situations; which are frustrating, frightening and exitless; can be a *theme* of particular games, which reveals its potential in the interplay between the internal and the external perspectives. It can also emerge as a result of a specific subjective relation between a self-avatar and a gameworld discovered as the aesthetic feature, or as a result of the self-avatar's decisions leading to "this divorce between man and this life" (Camus 1991, 6).

While having a closer look at the aesthetics of the absurd, I will undertake a close playing of *Everyday the Same Dream* (molleindustria 2009), i*s it time?* (Fraina 2010), and *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013). My analysis will be interwoven with examples of dwellers of dystopian worlds taken from literature.

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[1] As argued in Chapters 2.4 and 2.5.

All of them are patronised by Sisyphus — the mythological incarnation of hopeless efforts, and the hero of Albert Camus's essay (Camus 1991, 1–138). According to the existentialist, absurdity is an ineffaceable characteristic of the relation between the individual, and a world she is situated in. However, while encountered in a gameworld, I will argue that the absurd is evoked as a theme or atmosphere, but does not characterise the ontology of situatedness.

While analysing the *gameplay situation* in games where the self-avatar is expected to perform meaningless, routine, but necessary tasks, I would like to highlight the way they condition her position.

From the point of view of an *aesthetic situation*, the absurd is uncovered by the self-avatar's discovery that her subjective position within the gameworld renders her goal unreachable; or that the goal — transcending the level of micro-involvement (Calleja 2011) — does not exist. According to Albert Camus, "the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face" (Camus 1991, 10); and this is the moment the strike occurs within a gameworld.

From the *external perspective*, the most promising aspects of games to reveal Sisyphean situatedness are the themes and mechanics of futile work, lostness, and inability. This includes the way they correspond with the gameplay and reflective situations as experienced from the perspective internal to the gameworld, while creating distance and dissonance between the player and the avatar.

The Fate of Sisyphus

The gameplay situations of the interpreted games share their theme with the myth of Sisyphus, as it is reinterpreted by Albert Camus. His "whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing" (Camus 1991, 120), while rolling a useless rock to the top of the mountain, without any hope for the end of his meaningless struggle. As the existentialist points out, "this divorce between […] the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Camus 1991, 6).

"Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged" (Camus 1991, 122), Camus writes. The consciousness that every attempt to run from his fate will fail, makes the hero tragic and — paradoxically — happy. Happy: because he is conscious of his humanity and shares with others the paradox of his existence. As Jerzy Kossak puts it:

"Taking a position of absurd gives a human being real freedom, unconfined illusion of hope, passion of life not limited by concerns about future"[2].

Sisyphus is condemned and powerless; he will always remain an absurd hero. He was punished for his love of life and disobedience to the gods. Now, scorn is his only weapon. His revolt against human situatedness in the world and escape from death make him feel that he did everything he possibly could. He gained deep knowledge of his condition, its limitations, and its horizons. Therefore, he knows that the absurd is ineffaceable.

"Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance" (Camus 1991, 93).

Sisyphean happiness is based on the clearness of his vision. From the moment he gains understanding that life is the final and only goal of human existence, the efforts invested in everyday iterations turn out to be his source of joy.

Despite the situation's apparent exitlessness, an absurd victory is possible. According to Camus, from the moment one's situatedness is realised, it becomes the individual's own fate. Sisyphus chooses his destiny when he descends the mountain he will climb again to roll his burden. Can this moment be experienced within the gameworld?

Repetitiveness, Repetitiveness, Repetitiveness...

The protagonist of the minimalist, two-dimensional side-scroller game entitled *Everyday the Same Dream* is a regular Joe; completely reduced to his

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[2] (Kossak 1974, 21). Quotation translated by author.

role as a worker. Interactions with the gameworld are limited to moving left or right, the activation of simple dialogues, and changing the state of chosen items by use of the spacebar.

The Nameless wakes up in the morning as the alarm clock rings. He dresses up. He greets his wife standing in the kitchen and rushes to his office, where — being customarily late — he listens to his bosses' reprimands. Weaving between identical desks, he takes his place in his cubicle - and suddenly, he wakes up in his own bed.

As long as the self-avatar adapts to the routine of the gameplay situation limited to the workday, anything is subject to change. The game can be replayed *ad infinitum* in unaltered form.

From the perspective of the reflective situation, the position of the self-avatar seems to be comfortable enough to be desirable. However, at the same time, it is uncomfortable enough to fill her with awe. The in-game life of the Nameless is an incorporation of the existential absurd; endlessly repeating indistinguishable days that give neither any satisfaction, nor enable fulfilment.

The life of the corporate worker is here experienced through the repetitiveness of the sequences of banal events; in the representation of the everyday world in shades of grey; by the interactivity of common, *useful* items — an alarm clock, a wardrobe, a car — as well as the gradually discovered, but equally limited, interactivity of *unusual* items that questions an ordinary schedule of the day. Their presence make the in-game world even more empty, futile, and pointless; since they suggest that there is — or was — another rhythm of life, they promise some meaning. The setting of the gameplay situations is work, a necessity that organises the in-game life. However, it becomes more and more inconsequential, when the self-avatar starts following the *unusual* items.
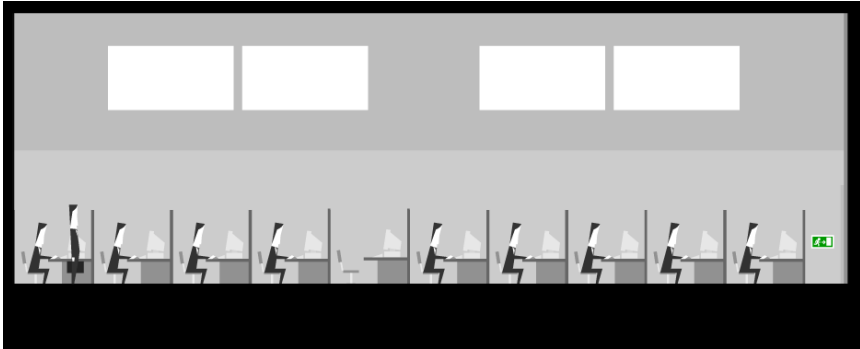
(molleindustria 2009. Screenshot taken by the author)

(molleindustria 2009. Screenshot taken by the author)

The external perspective opens the field for intertextual reference; the life of Guy Montag, the protagonist of *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury 2012), consisted of similarly repeatable days. The breakthrough was caused by the moment he met Clarisse McClellan - the girl who showed him that the world can be perceived from a different perspective. He realised that,

"he wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back" (Bradbury 2012, 9).

The major change in his approach; one which affected many others; was the change of consciousness: the self-reflective turn that changed his situatedness.

At first, in *Everyday the Same Dream,* the only indication of such a change is an enigmatic sentence articulated by an elderly woman who the self-avatar

meets in a lift. She prophesies: "five more steps and you will be a new person" (molleindustria 2009). This promise - hidden in the gameworld - gives some hope to break free from the dystopia. But can I manage with the consciousness of absurdity of my in-game situation as a new person? Will the well-known order implode if I refuse to follow my everyday route?

The only way to check this is to take note of the background rather than foreground of the self-avatar's recognised situatedness. I acquire consciousness of the authored environment I am surrounded by; the woman in a lift, the homeless man, a cow on a pasture, the last leaf hanging on a tree growing in a car park in front of the office. This way the possibility of changing the routine appears on the horizon. Despite nothing changing in the gameworld, the specific existential project of the self-avatar emerges from the background.

Interaction with each of the *unusual* elements mentioned above shows some aspects of life absent from the initial, typical scenario of the Nameless' workday. However, they do not broaden the field of actions in the gameplay situation. Nevertheless, these "absurd discoveries" (Camus 1991, 16), gradually alter the meaning of the gameplay situation. Despite not changing the extent of the self-avatar's interactions with the gameworld, she can observe how the world changes while the Nameless takes consecutive steps to becoming a "new person".

These discoveries make the gameworld gradually deserted. The Homeless, who offered: "I can take you to a quiet place" (molleindustria 2009), shows the self-avatar a graveyard. The Nameless will never meet him again. After taking the last of the five steps — losing his job — despite following the well-known path, the world seems to be irretrievably changed. The wife, the boss, all the colleagues, and even the traffic jam disappear. At this moment, the game proposes — literally — an emergency exit. The self-avatar climbs up to the roof of the skyscraper to see a non-player character, identical to the player character, jumping from the edge. After you lose your job, there is nothing more to lose.

Due to simplicity of the aesthetic form of *Everyday the Same Dream,* and the repetitiveness of in-game days — as long as the self-avatar does not bother to search for something *unusual,* or does not manage to find it — each

day of my in-game life will be lost in oblivion, just the same as any other. The self-avatar will take her place in the cubicle, and will wake in the morning. However, if she chooses to search for change, she will be equally disappointed when discovering, that the fate she wanted to transform was the only one available.

Waiting in the Dark House[3]

The kind of joy Sisyphus can feel when realising that life is human being's only and final goal, is as unreachable for the protagonist of *is it time?* (Fraina 2010) as it was for the Nameless. The self-avatar — condemned to her flat, body, and senility — is depicted in the context of living in the past. Moreover, the constant pressure of satisfying her own simple needs makes her unable to enjoy any moment of the in-game life. In consequence, the self-avatar's situatedness closely resembles the protagonist of an essay *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* written by Camus (1968, 58–62). The essay is a sombre portrait of a religious fanatic, who turned her life into waiting for death, as she spends her days cultivating the shrine she bought for herself; while in the game designed by Fraina, the main challenge is dealing with everyday chores as old age sets in.

The gameplay situation is set in an ordinary day of an elderly woman living alone and suffering from depression after her husband's death. In the gameworld of *is it time?* (Fraina 2010), each day makes the old avatar less self-reliant. Ryszard Przybylski, Polish researcher and essayist, writes about a bond between an elderly person and her flat as follows:

"The old age makes the flat; which used to be just a customary, domesticated place; in one moment transform into a grave. The man is buried while still alive. And it is not a prison. It is a grave. […] Everything is sinking in abandonment, in oblivion; in immemorial signs of old age. And nothing is going to be finished here. Only the host can be finished here"[4].

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[3] Some parts of this chapter were previously published in Polish as Kania 2016a.

[4] (Przybylski 2008, 24–25). Quotation translated by author.

The aesthetics of the absurd in this game is visible in two planes from the point of view of the aesthetic situation. On the one hand, it is dominant in the dissonance between the gameworld and possibilities of the self-avatar, with every consecutive day deepening the impression of impotence and useless struggle; while on the other, it is evoked by the auto-reflective mechanisms of framing screens that makes each day a closed chapter, and changes the player's situatedness towards the gameworld by reflecting over its state.

Initially, a condition of the self-avatar is indicated just by her appearance, slow movement, and limited number of activities. However, the world of the old woman after her husband's death is getting darker every day; the light is dimming. The gameworld becomes increasingly strange and impenetrable. Her faltering sight, hearing, and comprehension make every single day harder and harder to outlast. The goal of the game sounds trivial: "Live as long as you want to live" (Fraina 2010). In *is it time?,* "to live" means to perform your routine tasks slowly until you ultimately get frustrated, or until you are unable to get the object fulfilling your current need on time.

In the course of a day, the self-avatar's state and needs are indicated by status bars well-known from adventure games and virtual pets. Here, the interface contains information about *hunger*, which can be appeased by a sequence of dull activities performed in the same repeatable order; take the food out of the fridge, reheat, and eat. The second factor is *fatigue* that can be lessened by going to bed and ending the day. The third; and crucial to the atmosphere of the game; is the state of *boredom*. In order to prevent it from getting higher, the self-avatar can turn on the television, or go outside to talk to a neighbour of the same age, sitting on the bench in front of the house. If the player lets the bar get close to the zero value, the self-avatar's movements get even slower. The commentary informs that "depression affects your ability to move" (Fraina 2010). Beside the standard ways of interacting with the gameworld — movement and manipulation of objects — there is the possibility to emotionally react to events, as the self-avatar is able to cry by — as she is instructed — pressing "Down to cry" (Fraina 2010).

The game is a collection of days separated by nights. When the self-avatar goes to sleep; exhausted by her Sisyphean efforts that lead to nothing but its own sustaining; the player is offered a different subjective stance. Instead

of struggling with an increasingly difficult environment, she is assigned the role of judge, subconsciousness, nature or god. The absurd is made explicit. While ending each day, she needs to answer the titular question: *is it time?* Being faced with taking the decision whether the elderly woman will live or die, the player needs to answer the existential question; which is — according to Camus — the only fundamental philosophical issue. Just like every person who recognises the absurd as a fundamental characteristic of the human being's situation in the world, she needs to decide "whether life is or is not worth living" (Camus 1991, 3). The author of the game, Jamie Fraina, formulates the question in a different, more general perspective: "When is life not worth living?" (2010).
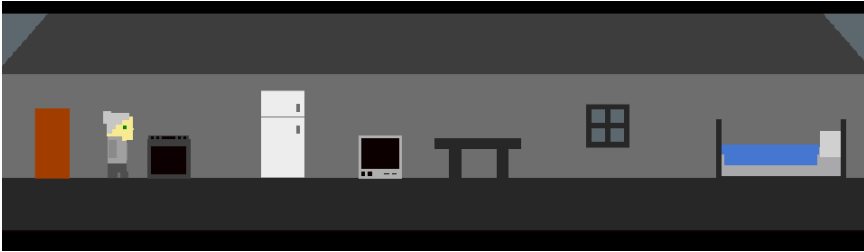
(Fraina 2010. Screenshot taken by the author)
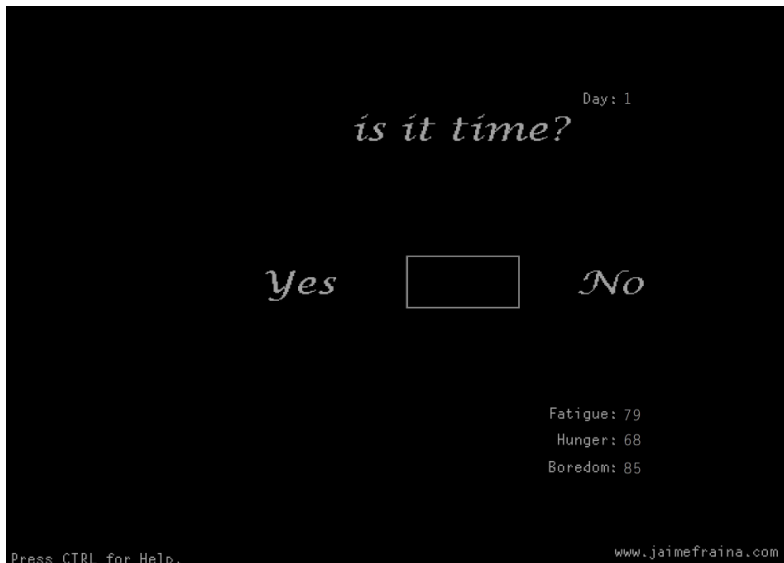
(Fraina 2010. Screenshot taken by the author)

The absurd is additionally exposed by the fact that the in-game life of the self-avatar turns out to be dependent on the decision taken from the external point of view; and this is not the self-avatar — the old lady — who answers the titular question. In consequence, the duality of the relationship between the player and the avatar makes the question cover both suicide and euthanasia. The points of view get polarised: I, the old self-avatar during the day, and the character perceived from the point of view of the framing screen, which can be left or told to die during the night. The death of the avatar is hers, not mine. The Sisyphean task is over.

However, in *is it time?* death of the self-avatar can occur not only as a result of the player's decision. It can also be a result of negligence. In this case, it becomes a failure. The self-avatar's life is limited to preparation of food — quickly enough to not faint from hunger. Lying down on the bed — quickly enough to not faint from enfeeblement. The third faint ends the game; it is fatal and makes the in-game life "an enterprise which is *lacking*" (Sartre 1978, 536), as Sartre describes an abruptly-ended existence.

The Fatal Service

In *Papers, please* (Pope 2013), the self-avatar is a newly-hired employee at the Customs Hall in Grestin, the fictional state of Arstotzka. From *the primordial speech of the game* (Cf. Arsenault and Perron 2008) in the story mode, I can learn that self-avatar's name was pulled in The October Labor Lottery, and this way he started to work as an immigration inspector. His *thrownness* (Cf. Heidegger 2001, 220 [175]) constitutes his primary characteristic. From now on, his duties, obligations, and even his value as an individual are determined by this random event.

The self-avatar is assigned a flat and a tedious job as an officer, characterised by the piling up of tasks, continuously raising expectations, and additional rules every single day. His duty is to check the documents of the visitors and immigrants entering Arstotzka, as well as taking decisions on who can enter the country, and who will be turned away or arrested. The general atmosphere of the totalitarian country resembling the regimes of the twentieth century is depicted by retro graphics in shades of grey and brown; fonts mirroring old

typing machines; and a soundtrack playing the rhythms of a military march. The description of the self-avatar's situatedness is minimal, but emotionally repelling.

The visual layer of *Papers, please* (Pope 2013) comprises of two boards. The first presents the passport control desk and the controlled person, with a background view on the long queue formed along the wall that halved the town of Grestin. The second board depicts everyday changes in the state of the self-avatar's personal budget. This way, during breaks between workdays, the self-avatar learns that she has a family of wife, son and parents-in-law. Therefore, she needs to decide how to allocate the money she earns. Will she pay for heating, food, or medicines? Whose needs are the most urgent?
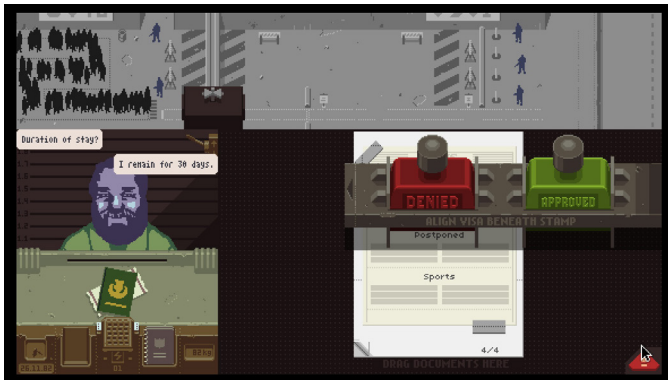
(Pope 2013. Screenshot taken by the author)

(Pope 2013. Screenshot taken by the author)

The self-avatar's tasks during the workday is apparently easy: to learn the recommendations of the Ministry of Admission, which changes every day; to call the next person using the loudspeaker as quick as the current one is customs-cleared; to apply appropriate rules to the documents presented by a potential visitor approaching the desk. If everything is correct — the passport is valid and used by its owner; the owner holds a visa or permit of residence — the self-avatar will let the person enter the Arstotzkian territory. However, there are also obstacles: the time pressure is growing, as outside the office a crowd is getting denser. Moreover, official recommendations for the procedure of entrance changes daily; visas and permissions come and go, rules have more and more exceptions, and the atmosphere is getting hectic due to the threat of terrorism.

The feeling of imprisonment, and the impression of being reduced to the role of a machine, sources from actions taken in the gameplay situation. They are so absorbing that they do not leave much time for reflection over the self-avatar's situatedness. The position voluntarily accepted by the player approaching the game turns out to be overwhelming and oppressive when experienced from the point of view within the gameworld. Camus writes that "[T]he workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd [than Sisyphus']" (Camus 1991, 122). Minute by minute, the self-avatar's situatedness also displays a greater resemblance to Sisyphus' absurd fate. *Papers, please* makes the self-avatar a cog in the bureaucratic machine — the contractor of rules coming from on high; while the rules will, in turn, constitute the basis for evaluating and judging the performance of their contractor. Moreover, it demands to be very thorough, as after two warnings — each following a mistake or choice not in line with the guidelines — costs a certain amount of money which is deducted from the self-avatar's salary. The tedium of work and the necessity to act automatically, to control the increasing number of parameters as quickly and precisely as possible, are interwoven with short breaks at the end of the day; just long enough to contemplate the absurdity of these useless efforts.

The interplay between the gameplay situation and the reflective situation starts when at the self-avatar's desk, characters appear – characters which the self-avatar would like to admit despite the rules. There is a woman who has parted with her husband; an obdurate old smuggler placing on the desk

of the immigration inspector a hand-made passport; and a girl afraid that her prospective employer standing in the queue after her, Dari Ludum, will force her and her sister to work in the brothel. The self-avatar is able to approve or deny any person's entry, despite the game penalising violation of its rules. However, it also penalises acting in line with the rules by making the self-avatar responsible for the decisions taken within the gameworld, e.g. if the self-avatar admit Dari Ludum to enter Arstotzka, the next day morning press will report "Dancers At Grestin Club Found Dead! Newly Immigrated Girls Victims of Human Trafficking" (Pope 2013). These situations, by highlighting discrepancies between the expectations of the gameworld and the self-avatar's abilities, make the absurd even more tangible in the sinister atmosphere of this gameworld.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

I believe that the atmosphere of the absurd, which accompanies unpleasant and repetitive activities serving their own precarious sake, is what constitutes the major characteristics of the aesthetics of all three games.

The situation of Sisyphus is tragic because he was able to find his own personal meaning of his endless struggle. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy", because he is conscious of his situatedness and chooses his fate, Camus writes (1991, 123). This choice is unavailable for the self-avatars condemned to their digital hells, which can be turned off at any moment. They are not heroic but limited to their wasted efforts.

The three games highlight different aspects of the absurd devoid of its dramatic nature, and convey in divergent ways the "absurd sensitivity" (Camus 1991, 2).

In *Everyday the Same Dream,* the Sisyphean efforts of the protagonist are perceivable only in the audio-visual layer. The self-avatar enters the workplace, but she does not do the job. However, the work is depicted as absolutely futile, and the time is perfectly circular, just like in Sisyphus' hell. If the self-avatar does not step out of the path, everything will be repeated in identical sentence, over and over again.

Is it time? points at the meaning of performed tasks. Are they worth the effort, even if they are only intended to maintain this hopeless life? Is life without satisfaction worth living anymore?

The experience of tedious work that brings forward ethical dilemmas can be found in *Papers, please*. Performing tiresome tasks and the exitlessness of the situation; when the self-avatar can choose between bad and worse solutions; is narratively motivated by his will to support his family, and emotionally by the curiosity of the limits of this experience. But it remains absurd, as no justification can be proposed for this fruitless effort.

3.3. The *They* speak inside me[1]

> "In terms of the 'they', and as the 'they', I am 'given' proximally to 'myself' […].
> Proximally *Dasein* is 'they', and for the most part it remains so"
> (Heidegger 2001, 167 [129]).

The theme of everyday chores is continued in the following pages, as the present chapter undertakes a close playing of *Sunset* (Tale of Tales 2015), where the self-avatar performs the role of housekeeper. However, the main point of interest is the relation between a player perceiving an avatar as herself, and reflecting over this relation from the internal perspective; and a soliloquising protagonist, as perceived from the point of view external to the gameworld. I will approach these issues while interpreting *Sunset*, the game that — also because of its flaws — reveals the split between the player and the avatar; between in-game duties and the pleasure of gameplay.

For the purpose of studying the compound of the self-avatar, I will make use of two Heideggerian terms: the *They* and *distantiality*.

While the player approaches limitations inscribed in her in-game position from the point of view of the aesthetic situation, it can be described as the *They*. From this perspective, the monologues render an expression of depersonalised opinion and a form of pressurising.

In turn, the *distantiality* emerging between the player and the protagonist becomes visible in the moments of interplay between the player's experiences as the self-avatar, and her external approach to the protagonist; soliloquising and defining herself with her own gaze.

Angela Burnes

The seventies have just begun. Angela Burnes, a black American woman, has tried to escape the fate of the female residents of Baltimore; run from the

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter was published in Polish (Kania 2017).

They determining the congruence of the social position and expected role. The *They* shaping her fate. However, because of a military takeover, she gets stuck in Anchuria — the country located in Latin America. Here, in this unfamiliar country where people speak in a foreign language, she has to undertake the same role she wanted to escape. She complains:

"Five years at Harrison College, living on tips and whatever my Aunt Anita could save up. Five years to get a piece of paper that says I'm an engineer. Also I can clean this man's house" (Tale of Tales 2015).

While entering the gameplay situation of *Sunset* I-Angela wend my way to a lift. My duties and role within the gameworld becomes clear while I learn to experience Angela as myself. While performing tasks specified on the list pinned inside the lift, I become Angela Burnes[2]; and her position determines my duties, her tasks — completed, awaiting, or neglected — situate me within the gameworld[3]. The monologues and comments concern my performance, pointing out how *it should be done*. The *They* judge my performance, and make it comparable to some system of rules incorporated in the self-avatar; the structure I learn and internalise make the *They* speak inside me.

The inner monologues are what shape the gameplay situation, and my reflective understanding of aesthetics of the avatar as my own situatedness within the gameworld. I am here, but "*proximally*, it is not 'I', in the sense of my own Self, that 'am'; but rather the Others, whose way is that of the 'they'" (Heidegger 2001, 167 [129]).

Angela Burnes observes herself in the mirror. Her image is reflected by the surface of the glass doors in Gabriel Ortega's penthouse. Her words make her situatedness within the gameworld more precise; they reflect over it and make it meaningful:

"I'm alone in the apartment. It's not my home, but the walls and the windows don't care. And no one else is here to see me. I can do what I want, yet I restrain myself. Sitting at Señor

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[2] The moment of *bad faith*, cf. chapter 2.4.

[3] The moment of *spirit of seriousness*, cf. chapter 2.4.

Ortega's desk, touching his things, I feel ambivalent" (Tale of Tales 2015).

In a while the sun will set. It means that the time for fulfilling the tasks commissioned to the self-avatar by the mysterious principal is at an end.

However, listening to Angela's monologues makes me reflect over the self-avatar, as she is situated within the gameworld. As opposed to Angela's words, the self-avatar didn't intend to sit at Gabriel Ortega's desk, and while being in his apartment the self-avatar does not restrain herself from anything she can do here. Who did, then? The self-avatar unpacks some bibelots from cardboard boxes, and arranges them without permission; she leaves a tap turned on. In order to exercise the limits of her agency in the gameworld, she neglects her duties and leaves the apartment.

How, then, from the in-game point of view, while playing a game (Leino 2009, 10; Leino 2010, 133–34), can I reflectively understand the relation between the act of soliloquising and the self-avatar? And how is it to be understood from the point of view external to the game?

Testing the Distance

The first point I would like to shed light on is the *distance* that emerges between the self-avatar and the protagonist. The self-avatar reflects over herself from the point of view of the in-game aesthetic situation. While the soliloquising protagonist – when she is presented as reflecting over her own self or looking in the mirror – is observed by the player from the external point of view. Therefore, her distinctiveness is perceived as individuality of the character (Cf. Vella 2014).
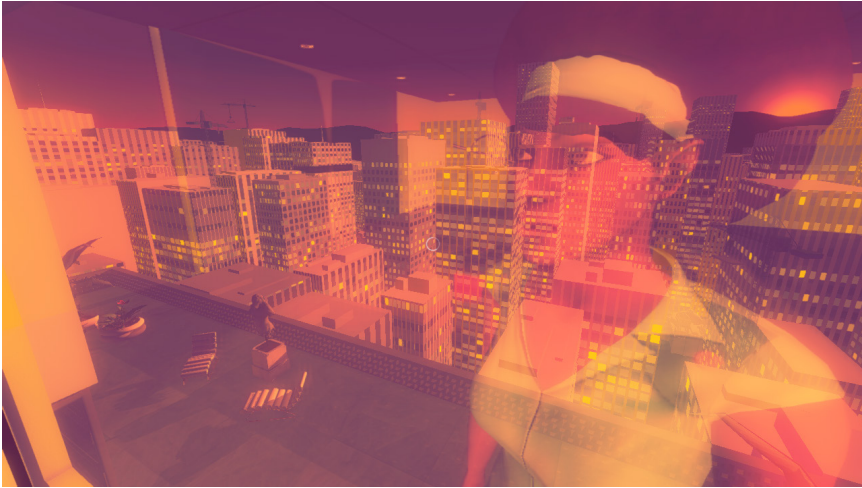
(Tale of Tales 2015. Screenshot taken by the author)

Heidegger writes about the concept of distanced being-with-one-another, which, I think, can be considered as the basis of this relation:

"In one's concern with what one has taken hold of, whether with, for, or against, the Others, there is constant care as to *the way one differs from them*, whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one's own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed. The care about this distance between them is disturbing to Being-with-one-another, though this disturbance is one that is hidden from it. If we may express this existentially, such Being-with-one-another has the character of *distantiality* [*Abstandigkeit*]" (Heidegger 2001, 163–164 [126–127]).

I believe that the common being of the player and the avatar — mine and Angela Burnes' — spreads between the poles of deepening the distance and nullifying it; between acting as the self-avatar and observing her.

Sunset is a game lacking an evaluation system; consisting of exploration, looking for the places where the scheduled task/s need to be performed, and making decisions concerning the emotional response to the in-game events. In this gameworld, the reflective interplay develops in the rhythm of dialectics of splits between the contents of monologues and the gameworld available to the player; in the audio-visual signs of the character's separateness from

the player; and in the mechanics of control over the avatar.

The Territory

The space of exploration open to the self-avatar is limited to Gabriel Ortega's apartment. It is available once a week of the in-game time, just for an hour preceding sunset.

Angela Burnes, considered to be the protagonist, spends all her remaining hours "living" in the gameworld. In her monologues, she informs the player about events and details crucial to the gameplay. She broadly comments on them at the beginning of every workday, informing about the political situation and disturbances on the streets, as threat and her own concerns increase.

She says that the apartment is a hidden place where she "can pretend for a little while that none of this is happening" (Tale of Tales 2015). The inaccessibility of the gameworld for the self-avatar becomes increasingly disturbing, while its presence — or even over-presence — provides Angela with constantly ingoing topics for new monologues.

It is not easy for Angela to get to the apartment she attends. The civil war makes her plead repeatedly — half for the player and half for herself — "I'm late! There were so many checkpoints on my way up here. Let's get to work" (Tale of Tales 2015), and "Late again. It's hectic out there. There are soldiers everywhere" (Tale of Tales 2015) — almost like the rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, who exclaimed: "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (Carroll 2001, 11). I can meet her only inside the building, in the lift. I will not see any of the "outside" in the game, any guardian of the military regime.

I will be reminded on this specific "narrowing" of the world by the panoramic view from the terrace of Gabriel Ortega's penthouse. It is also exposed by the changing span of the gameplay situation. At first, it embraces a whole, yet unfurnished apartment. In the course of time, as consecutive weeks of furnishing and domesticating pass, access to certain areas of the penthouse

becomes limited. Angela can enter only these rooms, where there is some task to fulfil. In the third, final phase of the game, she will be able to explore only the main hall and one room chosen by the employer.

In parallel to circles of spatial limits, the topics of Angela's everyday soliloquies gradually alter. Although this is not linear change, accents in the protagonist's "thoughts" in the lift are constantly getting more personal. At the beginning of the game, her comments are concentrated on the political situation of Anchuria, and her opinions concerning the role she thinks she should perform in these events. Later on, she elaborates on her family and brother, revolutionist — on their shared childhood and his current lot. Finally, the player can observe Angela's concerns on developing — partially as a result of the self-avatar's choices — an ambivalent, potentially *romantic relationship,* between the protagonist and her employer.

Undoubtedly, Angela Burnes preferably speaks about her feelings. While she refers to a moment when she found out that her principal is involved in cooperation with the regime, she confesses:

"I couldn't even move after I read through the papers that Ortega brought home to sign. I stood there with my heart pounding and my face burning.[…] At first I felt bad, snooping, but after I read through it all, I knew my brother and his revolutionary friends needed to know about this" (Tale of Tales 2015).

However, when she engages in the resistance movement, she says: "I feel strange exhilaration. It's not my homeland, but I'm doing something meaningful" (Tale of Tales 2015).

In every sentence articulated by Angela, the player feels a dominant overtone of confession. Due to this, the character takes its shape and concentrates the gameworld around her. Angela Burnes talks about herself, reflects in mirrors, casts shadows; she is present as a protagonist in the strong sense, and she echoes this presence in her monologues. Her soliloquies have, then, two functions. From the external point of view, they are *decreasing the distance* between the player and the protagonist by introducing her into secrets of the 'soul of the avatar'; they enable the player to better understand the character, and perhaps to empathise with her. However, from the internal perspective

of the aesthetic situation, the monologues *create the distance*, as they enable the self-avatar to hear the *They* predominantly speaking inside her, and making her agency and mere reflection secondary.

Mirror, Mirror… Tell me

The distanced otherness of Angela Burnes gains its full character with the support of possibilities to look at herself specific for the medium. In the gameplay situation, the self-avatar is given from the first person perspective, and becomes visible in reflections, shadows, mirrors. This visual dimension of reflectivity is supported by the modernist architecture of the apartment in which the game takes place. Inspired by Yves Saint-Laurent's penthouse, it is full of shiny surfaces and huge sheets of glass (Samyn 2015).

The avatar, if left for a while and observed from the external perspective, starts to act in her own way —a mutual characteristic of various *Tale of Tales'* creations (2005; 2009; 2009b). In these strange moments, when the character is not controlled by the player, she approaches the mirror and starts to exercise her gestures — lifts her arms, looks approvingly at herself — which expose the distance between the player and the protagonist.

Where are the *They?*

The dialectics of *distantiality* is fully exposed when the self-avatar needs to decide about the emotional — tender or operational — approach to chores she was commissioned. As long as the monologues are articulated in the first person; when the utterances concern actions that need to be performed; the form changes. In consequence, acts of communication between the *They* and the self-avatar take a form of orders formulated in third person, and directed toward the self-avatar. The sole linguistic form creates an inner split within the self-avatar, when she addresses herself this way.

The reference of the self-avatar to the gameworld is a moment of exposure of the existential meaning of the in-game the *They,* that the player gradually internalises during the exploration of the gameworld in the gameplay

situation. The *They* is a way of being determined by tasks, gazes, engagements piling up around me, that are consolidated by "the inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unaware from *Dasein* as Being-with" (Heidegger 2001, 164 [126]). The situatedness within the gameworld is always related to these determinants, as it becomes lucid from the perspective of the in-game aesthetic situation. The self-avatar can follow the emerging requirements by employing *bad faith* (Cf.: Sartre 1978, 44–45, 47–70, 628; Leino 2012), or deepen the distance by not following the gameplay situation and approaching the game form the external perspective.

While experiencing Angela as myself, as the self-avatar from the point of view of the in-game aesthetic situation, I interpret her voice not as a sign of an individual distinct from myself, but as an exponent of the super-individual order. It is experienced as a pressure or a form of impersonal force, that is present when "We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge" (Heidegger 2001, 164 [126-127]).

Angela Burnes' comments, as interpreted from this perspective — both those self-reflective and others outlining the existential situatedness within the gameworld — highlight the meaning of the gameworld as already shaped, but simultaneously different from the meaning of the everyday world the player lives in. Here one can recognise the existential the *They* as duties, common knowledge of obvious facts, and widely-accepted rules, that determine my understanding of the in-game situatedness. Heidegger asks about the *They* in search of its existential meaning: "*Who* is it, then, who has taken over Being as everyday Being-with-one-another?" (Heidegger 2001, 163 [125]). Following his question, I will also ask from the in-game point of view: how does the relationship between self-avatar and everything that precedes individual self-making within the gameworld look like; how does the *They* co-create my self within the gameworld by outlining the gameplay situation?

Duties

From the list stuck in the lift, the player learns about duties that build her character; the same duties frames the self-avatar's being within the game — the gameplay situation. The routine of the housewife is depicted in game mechanics, which becomes as boring as chores, as soon as the self-avatar gets acquainted with her simple tasks, e.g. the quest for the place where dusting should be performed. Either way, the decision; if there is a need or interest to perform the certain task; is not left to the self-avatar as the task is clearly specified but its execution is not evaluated. Moreover, the monologues provide an explanation of why am I fulfilling my duties, and who I am in the gameworld for others.

While following the *They*, the self-avatar acts in *bad faith*; she behaves as if she was determined by the role she had once undertaken, and is unable to abandon it from then on. This is analogical to a bartender who narrows his perception of himself down to being just a bartender. In consequence, he becomes even *too much* a bartender in order to conform to everything that a bartender should be, as described in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1978, 59). The measure of *bad faith* is not acting within given circumstances, but looking at the gameworld exclusively through the given role, despite being aware of the insufficiency and reductive character of this approach to self. During this moment in *Sunset,* I am just a housekeeper who perceives her own actions as determined by the rules: the state of bibelots, interior design, and the needs of others. I am the performer of duties specified on the list by my principal, and the rhythm of my actions is measured by minutes before the sun sets.

Mechanics of interactions with objects in *Sunset* resembles dialogue systems. Sometimes the player is able to decide if she wants to interact with an object (she presses "E" — "execute" — to take an action). She can neglect her task, the unchecked box on her list. However, usually this is the way *how* the chore is performed which is important here. The choice between two different behaviours it connected with "Y" and "N" buttons, it is the choice between "yes" and "no", that often is also evaluated in Angela's terms as "good" and "bad", as per the following phrases:

"Y: Tenderly polish the silver with your own breath"
"N: Polish silver with standard chemicals" (Tale of Tales 2015)

or,

"Y: Prepare a tender, homey dish of macaroni and cheese"
"N: Prepare sophisticated meal with oysters and caviar" (Tale of Tales 2015).

What is the question the self-avatar answers while performing her chores? The solution of this problem is suggested by the representational convention of Angela's tasks. The self-avatar's quest is limited to finding the place in which the given action needs to be executed; and choosing the emotional atmosphere of making dinner, unclogging a pipe, or arranging books on shelves. While the animation of Angela doing declared tasks is repeatedly replaced by a scene of the sunset over the city, accompanied by the face of the clock showing the acceleration of time and the sound of Angela's whistling. This is a clear reference to convention common in films of the '70s; where erotic scenes were replaced with landscape scenes, flowers or natural phenomena.

This dialogical mechanics is repeated in interactions with absent owner of the apartment. Comments, which the self-avatar can add to Gabriel's notes attached to important items — the music system, chessboard, works of art — are also connected with an emotional response, "Y" or "N", "yes" or "not". Even the button on the keyboard the player needs to press is evaluating her choice with regard to Angela's system of values; and an evaluation of Angela's demeanour towards Gabriel, and towards the task itself.

The Sunset

The dissonance that breaks the subtle harmony between being the self-avatar, reflecting over her, and observing the character from the external point of view, becomes visible at every sunset that encapsulates the self-avatar's workday. The sun sets in San Bavon, and in its light the short clash takes place: the clash for agency within the gameworld. Is the *They* not only able to speak, but also to act inside me?

Exactly at 17:59 of the official Anchurian time, Angela Burnes sighs: "it's time to go home" (Tale of Tales 2015). If the self-avatar does not respond to her suggestion, the doors of the lift will obliterate her view, independently of neither her actions, nor the place she occupies at the moment. Is this the *They* who decided that she will promptly go home?

Only in the last evening, the decision to stay in the penthouse after sunset is left to the self-avatar. It seems that this is the self-avatar who is responsible for making a decision. Today on her list are just two points. The first task is to prepare the dinner — she can decide if she prepares the dinner for one or for two. The second is to stay and wait for Ortega. Can the self-avatar reject performing this job, as she has done with many others, and just leave?

This day, the *They* also remind the self-avatar to go home; however, today it is not *their* decision to take. If she stays, she wakes up in Gabriel Ortega's bedroom; but if she decides to leave the apartment before the sunset… she will also wake up in his bed.

Revolutionary Cinderella

The soliloquies of Angela Burnes, when listened to from the external perspective, present a pretty straightforwardly sketched back-story; and, in consequence, a rather flat character. The protagonist of *Sunset* is connected with the trope of Cinderella, who cleans the flat dreaming about love of the prince; with some features of the political activist.

She spies Gabriel Ortega and steals information concerning the military operations of the regime, in order to pass it to her brother and "his revolutionary friends" (Tale of Tales 2015). The tone of her monologues is contaminated with revolutionary slogans and sweet but naive manifestos:

"Inaction would be worse than impotence. My only regret is for the innocent blood being shed; the deaths of those who only wanted to live their lives" (Tale of Tales 2015).

Or, in a later part of the game:

"Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable" (Tale of Tales 2015).

Angela comments on the works of art collected by Gabriel Ortega; she talks about paintings, sculptures and chessboard, while drawing comparisons between the value of art and the value of human life.

Especially in the third part of the game, the stereotypisation of the character becomes predominant. Therefore, the initial interest in the character of Angela Burnes quickly transforms into impatience as a result of idle talk, truisms, and emptiness of character.

However, this aspect of the game also highlights nuances of the process of shaping the perspective within the gameworld. In the gameplay situation, the self-avatar is determined by the *They*. While in the aesthetic situation, the *They* is realised as the limits of the self-avatar's situatedness within the gameworld. The player perceives the interplay of the two positions from the perspective external to the gameworld, as interplay of the agency of the stereotypical character and the self-avatar's influence on the gameworld.

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Sunset frustratingly confronts the player with Angela Burnes who impersonates the *They*; i.e. a set of rules, constraints and obligations; and presents the character's individuality. The protagonist's monologues enable the self-avatar to perceive her situatedness (as a self-avatar) from the point of view of the in-game aesthetic situation. This situatedness is composed of the self-avatar's determination by the role, adopted by the player as her own; and the process of *distancing* that is finalised by the moment of perceiving Angela from the perspective external to the game; that is, distanced, articulated, and ultimately objectified.

Summary

In the *gameplay situation*, the They limits and guides the character experienced in *bad faith*; as well as imposes rules and hints on the meaning of the gameworld as one should read it, when it is approached in the *spirit of seriousness*.

The in-game *aesthetic situation* enables the self-avatar to reflect over herself from within her situatedness towards the gameworld. It opens the interpretative field that does not make claims of the artefact as functioning within the external world, but offers insight into the gameworld as experienced from inside; as an aesthetic anticipated wholeness experienced from the situated point of view. In consequence, it enables the revelation of phenomena that condition the self-avatar's experience.

The internalisation of the others; their incarnation in the in-game subjectivity in the form of the *They*; makes the self-avatar the only position available for perceiving and acting within the gameworld. Despite the reflective *distantiality*, the experience of suspension of the existential freedom of the player is the major characteristic of her condition as the self-avatar. It allows her to live through adventure within the non-absurd gameworld. As long as she wants to concretise her subjective position within this world, she also cannot escape the *They*. However, she can recognise it from the perspective of the in-game *aesthetic situation*, and enjoy the interplay between the internal and external points of view, that contribute to the overall meaning and aesthetic value of the game. This is the external perspective which opens the field for an intertextual reading of the game amongst other games, and due to the player's literacy, also makes their playing situated in the cultural landscape.

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Building on many existing solutions within the philosophy of computer games (as proposed by Espen Aarseth, Olli T. Leino, and Daniel Vella, to name just a few), and existential philosophy (that of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus), the open-ended character of the proposed existential aesthetics introduces a perspective for the development of description, and aesthetic interpretation, of the individual's situatedness

towards the digital game.

The presented attempt to the sketch of the existential aesthetics considers points of view adapted by creators, as well as the situatedness of players of computer games. This dual endeavour shows how perspective switches when - apparently - the same research area is approached from differing points of view; through analysis of discourse of authors of computer games, and through phenomenological reflection over the player's experiences with game considered to be world and text. This second passage; from the in-game situatedness of the self-avatar, to the textual analysis of the game artefact undertaken from the external perspective; reopens the field for considering discourses digital games participates in.

In conseqence, the proposed theoretical approach does not try to conceal the situatedness of the researcher. On the contrary, it argues that the proposed types of situatedness towards the researched phenomena supplement each other; and passages between them, not always easy to conceptualise, make the area dynamic and even more interesting.

These theoretical difficulties caused some moments to be explored in more detail than the others. Moreover, the choice of games interpreted in the course of the book was motivated by the need of exposition of existentially vital issues and structures. Hence, the selection could be accused of assigning privilege to games that foreground or subvert expected aesthetic features in unusual or unexpected ways. Nevertheless, I think that the presented model can also be useful in analysis of more mainstream or typical single player digital games with avatars. Undoubtedly, its shape and focal points could be modified by close playing of games that provide experiences that are more often connected with playing games. I therefore believe that research of the most representative games is the appropriate direction for future application of the proposed theoretical model.

In addition, I reckon that widening the research area will confirm that the aesthetics of *involvement*; which fulfils itself in the moment of interplay between the agency of the researcher and the text, as well as of the self-avatar, i.e. in-game subjectivity, and the concretization of the gameworld she finds herself in; will underline the value and importance of not separating

the subject and object of experience.

While initiating an experience of the AAA single player digital game with avatar, can the They also be discovered to be the aesthetic form of the self-avatar, when looked at through the *gameplay situation*?

Streszczenie

Perspektywy awatara. Szkic egzystencjalnej estetyki gier cyfrowych

Szkic egzystencjalnej estetyki gier cyfrowych, który zawarłam w książce, powstał z potrzeby zgłębienia zagadnienia usytuowania jednostki – autora i gracza – względem jednoosobowej gry cyfrowej z awatarem.

Skupiając się na analizie tytułów autorskich, niezależnych i artystycznych, koncentruję się na tym, jak różnie jawią się gry w zależności od perspektywy, z jakiej są postrzegane. Prezentowany sposób interpretacji opiera się na założeniu zaczerpniętym z filozofii egzystencjalnej; mianowicie, że to indywidualna ludzka egzystencja jest centralnym problemem filozoficznym. W takim horyzoncie teoretycznym, splot wydarzeń towarzyszący powstawaniu gry komputerowej czy graniu w nią, staje się znaczący jedynie z perspektywy konkretnej sytuacji.

W ramach egzystencjalnej estetyki gra funkcjonująca w rozmaitych dyskursach może być interpretowana jako część codziennego świata – cyfrowy artefakt, który jest projektowany i sprzedawany, rozgrywany i porównywany do innych.

W pierwszej części książki skupiłam się na więzi łączącej egzystencjalny projekt autora z tworzonym artefaktem z perspektywy twórcy – tak, jak przedstawiana jest ona w paratekstach towarzyszących powstawaniu gier cyfrowych. W trzech rozdziałach skoncentrowałam się na wyodrębnieniu dyskursów autorskiego projektowania: w pierwszym autorzy, *cyfrowi rzemieślnicy*, lokują swą pracę w ramach dyskursu rękodzielnictwa. W kolejnym, dotyczącym dyskursu poetyckiego, projektant staje się *strażnikiem wizji*. Natomiast w rozdziale dotyczącym *dyskuru oratorskiego,* autorzy biorą na siebie zadanie formułowania proceduralnych argumentów.

Perspektywę graczki i jej wielowymiarowego bycia w sytuacji względem gry prezentuje druga część monografii. To zarys inspirowanej głównie filozofią Jean-Paul Sartre'a egzystencjalnej fenomenologii usytuowania jednostki w świecie gry, wewnątrzgrowego życia mnie-awatara oraz jego wymiaru estetycznego. Omawiam w niej sposoby usytuowania graczki względem grywalnego

artefaktu oraz ich współgranie: *sytuację rozgrywki* i *sytuację estetyczną*, które składają się na *perspektywę wewnątrzgrową*; oraz *zewnętrzną perspektywę*, która dopełnia estetyczne rozumienie gry. Jest to autorska propozycja estetyki sytuacyjnej gier komputerowych, wsparta analizą egzystencjalnych fenomenów takich jak *zła wiara*, *duch powagi*, *znaczenie*, *wolność* i *przygoda* w kontekście gier komputerowych.

Bliskie odczytania cyfrowych gier, wykorzystujące teoretyczne rozstrzygnięcia części drugiej, składają się na ostatnią część książki. Odczytanie pierwsze koncentruje się na awatarach, których sprawczość jest w trakcie rozgrywki podawana w wątpliwość; drugie na cyfrowych Syzyfach, zamkniętych w światach przesiąkniętych atmosferą absurdu; trzecie zaś – na ekspozycji wcielonego w awatara Heideggerowskiego *Się*.

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