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Understanding Games as Played: Sketch for a first-person perspective for computer game analysis

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Making sense of 'player's experience'

Researchers interested in player's experience would assumedly, across disciplines, agree that the goal behind enquiries into player's experience is to understand the how games' features end up affecting the player's experience. Much of the contemporary interdisciplinary research into player's experience leans toward the empirical-scientific, in the forms (neuro)psychology, sociology and cognitive science, to name a few.[1] In such approaches, for example demonstrating correlation between physiological symptoms and an in-game event may amount to 'understanding'.

However, the experience of computer game play is a viable topic also for computer game studies within the general tradition of humanities. In such context, the idea of 'understanding an experience' invites an approach focusing on the *experienced significance* of events and objects within computer game play. This focus, in turn, suggests turning to the principles associated with (broadly speaking) phenomenology, among which is the idea of describing things as they appear, or as they are *given,* in the experience, from the first-person perspective.[2] (cf. Smith 1979, Moran 2006)

From the first-person perspective the challenge lies not in the subjective experience's inaccessibility but in the inherent personal richness of the experience's content. Rather than trying to embrace the richness by engaging in direct introspection, it makes sense to focus the search on the *conditions* of the player's experience. In this paper, I discuss the idea of "first-person perspective" in the context of computer game studies. I propose that conditions for player's experience could be sought from the materiality of the computer game artefact, rather than from the 'processual' or 'ideal (transmedial) game'. I derive the notion of *gameplay condition*[3] from the overlap of the player's "lusory attitude" (Suits 2005: 54) and the materiality of the single-player computer game artefact as it appears in the player's experience.

Outline of this paper

[1] For a review of such developments see Drachen & Nacke (2009)

[2] Given the breadth of what can be referred to as phenomenology, it needs to be acknowledged that by no means is the suggested approach, with its emphasis on the subjective, the only kind of phenomenological perspective toward computer games. Bogost (2008), for example has postulated what we might call a *speculative phenomenological* approach toward games, placing the minimum weight on human subjectivity.

[3] I have previously discussed the notion of gameplay condition in relation to player's emotions in Leino (2009).

I begin by acknowledging the player's involvement in the object of study for computer game studies. I proceed to motivate the proposed perspective by demonstrating that the two fronts in the alleged distinction between "those who study players" and "those whose study games" share an 'objective-scientific' perspective which equally inhibits both from accessing the experiential qualities of computer game play.

After laying out some premise for the argument concerning with the first-person perspective, I argue that in the context of what we have become to know as *single-player computer games*, the material game artefact is more definitive structure to the player's experience than the *processual* or *ideal/transmedial* game. I propose that conditions for player's experience could be sought from the materiality of the computer game artefact.

Drawing on Gadamer (2001) and Sartre (2001), I describe the single-player computer game as played as an intertwinement of freedom and responsibility sustained by its materiality. From this analysis the player, demonstrating "lusory attitude" (Suits 2005: 54), appears as subject to the *gameplay condition*. I suggest that in relation to the gameplay condition we can make inter-subjective sense of games as played. I conclude by exploring if the notion of gameplay condition can be used to explain enjoyment derived from gameplay in situations where the paradigmatic solution of referring to goals and challenges fails.

On the necessity of there being a player

As a premise I acknowledge that the player is fundamentally involved in the object of study of computer game studies. The player's involvement is a necessity already on a conceptual level: to conceive something as a game necessarily implies filling the position(s) of the player(s) with something, that is, conceiving something as being the player of the game. This is not to say that all studies on games should focus on the player, let alone on human beings. However, while there are innumerable purposes for studying games without concerning with the player, looking at something by framing it as a 'game' implies leaving room for the game's player.

That with which the player's position is filled does not necessarily have to be human, but can be anything ranging from rays of light (cf. Gadamer 2001: 105) and kittens (cf. Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 303) to the minimal and abstract Bob and Alice summoned to illustrate economic game theory (cf. Smith 2007: 86-95). The necessity of there being a player in a game carries from the conceptual onto the empirical; also the phenomena we call 'games' in the empirical reality necessitate players to become fulfilled. Calling a chess board and pieces (or a binary executable file, for that matter) a 'game' without a reference, through the activity of play, to those who make the decisions to move the pieces on the board would be an arbitrary reference to the purpose of the artefacts.

As the player's involvement is fundamental to the phenomenon under scrutiny across different levels of abstraction, it seems to come naturally that striving for a faithful description of such a phenomenon necessitates attempting to accommodate this involvement in one's analyses and arguments. In the context of computer game studies, the necessity of player's involvement gives pragmatic rise to a methodological requirement too: those who wish to understand a game often have to step in the shoes of the player. While secondary sources may supply valuable additional material, to study a game not as a 'black box' one needs to play it (Aarseth 2003: 3).

If one acknowledges the interdependency of games and playing, (either as a conceptual *a priori* or a requirement arising from the empirical reality) that one cannot study a game without it being played, and playing a game necessarily implies taking the player's perspective - one might conclude the that notions like 'player's perspective' and a 'game-as-played' are tautologies as what they signify is already part and parcel of accepted practice of game studies. However, that would be too quick a conclusion. In this paper I argue that there is a difference between *studying a game by playing it* and *studying a game as played*.

Studying games vs. studying players: articulating the 3rd person perspective

Many (Smith 2007: 242, Aarseth 2006: 1-2, Calleja 2007: 12, Bogost 2008: 22) have pointed out, sometimes half-jokingly, a potential division between *those who study players* (e.g. empirical and social scientists) and *those who study games* (e.g. humanities-inclined and critical scholars). While it goes without saying that in reality the field of computer games research escapes such simplification, making this kind of distinction assumedly drives forward the development of good practices for multidisciplinary exchanges, as it encourages scholars to be specific in delineating what they are and are not trying to do. This is also one of my intentions behind the following brief plunging into the debate. However, my main purpose for bringing up the difference between the two perspectives is, by demonstrating their (somewhat unexpected) similarities, to prepare ground for an alternative perspective that manages to get around an issue of which both prevailing perspectives suffer.

Aarseth (2006: 1-2) suggests that the significant difference between "textual" and "player-centric" traditions can be traced to their methodologies, which guide scholars to study certain aspects of games and to some extent also govern the choice of games to study. Bogost (2008: 26) sees the origins of the dichotomy in how purpose of research in a particular discipline affects the choice of objects of study. He suggests that "critical approaches" aim at understanding and documenting the games' "meaning along with the cultural relevance of that meaning", whereas the "social scientific" approaches focus on what the players "do with games and how they do it". Also Frasca (2007: 41) sees the connection between the definition of the object of study, purpose of research, and methodology: for example, taking the object of study, game, as an activity, emphasizes players ("games are something players do") and invites methodologies that are renowned for being able to assess human activities.

At first glance it seems that the positions dictated by paradigms concerning both method and object of study in empirical and humanities-inclined game studies are rather distanced. The procedures of making plausible claims from the two perspectives do not seem to have much in common. Acknowledging that the object of study for some is an aesthetic object and a social practice for some seems to separate the perspectives even further. However, I argue that the perspectives are in fact rather similar, inasmuch as they share the 'objective' scientific third-person orientation toward their objects of study.

While the 'objective' orientation is self-evidently embedded in methods of empirical games research, we can describe it in game studies, too. I acknowledge the ambiguity in the notion of 'objectivity'. My aim is not to discount the pursuit of objectivity "in the sense of avoiding prejudice or bias" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008: 28), but cast a critical look at the practice implied by the *de facto* methodological paradigm of humanities-inclined game studies (e.g. Konzack 2002, Aarseth 2003, Consalvo and Dutton 2006), according to which the computer game researcher distances him/herself as the playing subject from the object under study.

When presenting his game analysis methodology, Konzack (2002: 91-98) postulates seven "layers": hardware, code, functionality, gameplay, (semiotic) meaning, referentiality, socio-culture. Using Konzack's method one is able to give a pretty detailed description of any computer game, as his own analysis of *Soul Calibur* (1999) exemplifies. Strikingly, however, Konzack does not see 'experience' as worthy of a layer of its own, and the issue of researcher's own subjectivity is not discussed in the paper. Instead, Konzack (2002: 94) takes a strong determinist position by assuming that a specific kind of playing and the subsequent experience would automatically follow from certain properties in the game artefact, as he writes for example that "the challenge of the game comes from obstacles."

Consalvo and Dutton (2006) present a "methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games", intended as "a template for the qualitative, critical analysis of games as broadly figured 'texts'". Their approach implies a 'transparent' perspective from which observations about the game's content and features (such as object inventory and interface) could be made. They do not discuss how the researcher-player's subjectivity should be negotiated, but on the other hand it has to be pointed out that they do not attempt to speak about player's experience either. Methodologies like those postulated by Konzack (2002) and Consalvo and Dutton (2006) are useful as vocabularies with which to describe the features and contents of a particular computer game as a designed product. However, such methodologies *alone* do not advance the project of understanding the significance of game content as experienced by the player.

When postulating the two types of game scholars, the "critical player-theorist" and the "ethnographic player-observer" Aarseth (2007: 131) makes it explicit that in both orientations the researcher's own subjectivity tends to be shunted. "Self-play" poses a problem for the "ethnographic player-observer" because it might not be representative. For the "critical player-theorist", on the other hand, the researcher's involvement in the process under study, which potentially makes the process unique, "is seldom a topic for discussion, but bracketed by experience of play". Aarseth (ibid.: 132) points out that the "bracketing" of the particular and subjective is not an attempt of "disregard of social reality" but "a means to govern interpretation", manifested in an "ideal reader" who is a "function of the text". By implementing the ideal reader, "the humanist is trying to exclude himself from the interpretation, while acknowledging that this is impossible." (ibid: 131)

However, as a consequence such careful manoeuvring, for both the "ethnographic player-observer" the "critical game theorist" the lived gameplay carried out by the researcher is not material in itself, but one means among others by which to gather material to support claims about "the game". The theorist has to play because that's the only way to see what the game is like and the ethnographer needs to play in order to understand what the other players are talking about. We can augment the array of caricatures with an empirical scientist, who needs to play in order to be able tune his scientific instruments to correspond with in-game events. For them all, the 'particularity' in their playings is an unnecessary, perhaps unwanted, property of a 'tool' or of a method, perhaps providing anecdotal illustrations, but not in any case a quality of the material based on which claims are being made. Due to this 'objective' orientation, humanities-inclined games scholarship is not necessarily different from empirical sciences in that it runs into trouble and often has to resort to speculation when trying to account for "what is it like"[4] to play. Consider the following examples from both sides of the empirical sciences / humanities divide.

[4] I borrow this expression from the 'qualia' debate with no strings attached.

Discussing why players enjoy playing *The Sims* even though there is no goal, Juul (2007) suggests that "*there is much indication that* many players find great enjoyment in creating (and showing off) families and houses in *Sims*, and exploring and perfecting their clever manoeuvres in the *Grand Theft Auto* series." (Italics mine) We should note well that Juul does not write anything about his *own* enjoyment in either of the games. Equally speculative account on the side of empirical sciences can be found in Ravaja (2005: 9-10) who, when studying the bodily states of players of *Super Monkey Ball 2* (2002), "unexpectedly" found out that players react to a failure in ways that reverberate on the scientific instruments as suggestive of emotions of joy and happiness. They end up acknowledging that "characteristics such as visual impressiveness and excitingness *may be* more potent determinants of the emotional response of the player compared to the meaning of the event in terms of failure or success." (Italics mine) We observe that Ravaja et al. do not say anything about how *they* felt about the visual characteristics of the game.

When debating the differences in how phenomenology and psychology approach human emotions, Sartre (1962: 5) recognises that for the psychologist, who is satisfied with knowing based on the evidence accumulated that emotions *exist,* the phenomenologist's project of understanding emotions in terms of their significance seems "needless and absurd". Similarly, for the kind of arguments Juul (2007) and Ravaja et al. (2005) are making, the experienced significance of gameplay details would not even be relevant; the lack of accounting for the subjective side of gameplay is not, from the third-person perspective, really a lack at all. If Ravaja et al. (ibid.) had shared what they felt about visual effects of *Super Monkey Ball 2,* or if Juul (2007) had added that he himself enjoys creating and showing off families and houses in Sims, we would perhaps be a bit amused to know these details about persons behind the papers, but the anecdotes would not add to the credibility of their statements concerning the relationship between computer games and players' experiences. This goes to exemplify the difference between third-person and first-person perspectives.

Some premises for the 1st person persperctive

Whereas the scientific third-person perspective is considered with what things "are", the first-person perspective can 'only' concern with how things "appear" (cf. Gallagher and Zahavi 2008: 25). This can be taken to the specific context of games and play, too. Grondin (2001) suggests that for Gadamer "the concept of play marks [...] the boundary of the objectifiable", referring to Gadamer's (2001: 108) insistence that "the mode of being of play does not permit the player to relate to the play[/game] as to an object." From this it follows that relating to the play/game as an object implies that the perspective from which the game is being looked at is not that of the player. This is to suggest, in other words, that to occupy a "player's perspective" necessitates bracketing the questions concerning the ontological or metaphysical status of the game (e.g. "what a game is" beyond being played)

Given that one would agree with Gadamer, it could be concluded that it is impossible to simultaneously occupy a 'player's perspective' and strive for the 'perfect knowledge' implied in the attempts to give an exhaustive definition of a game or any of its features. Thus we can question the viability of notions like "goal" and "game state", perhaps also "rules", for an analysis proceeding from the first-person perspective. By definition, they imply the position of "perfect knowledge", and are part of the project of ontological enquiry into what games "are". As presuppositions about what we are going to encounter, potentially distorting our access, they should be "put out of court" (cf. Moran 2006: 11) until they possibly make an

appearance in the experience of play. Of course this is not to say that they could not, by definition, appear as relevant: perhaps what they signify appears important also from the first-person perspective.

However, my reader, benevolently thinking of best practices of proceeding with the project of game studies, might now consider occupying the perspectives one at the time – shifting between third-person and first-person perspectives when the need becomes evident. Studying the game-as-a-system here, and game-as-played there. While I am certainly positive regarding such attempts, it should be recognized that what one is then considering is methodological triangulation that transgresses epistemologies; anyone with experience of interdisciplinary research projects can recognize the hardships that potentially underpin such attempts. The objects of study are different from the two perspectives: it is not necessarily the 'same game' one is studying from two angles.

But adapting the player's perspective does not mean turning the gaze completely inwards. The difference between the objects of study is not that between "a game" and "an experience". This is illustrated by Gallager & Zahavi (2008: 26), who point out a difference between how psychotherapy and phenomenology are interested in experiences. Psychotherapy concerns with a person's experience of the world here and now, perhaps by means of introspection, whereas phenomenology is not interested in the idiosyncratic experience, but in the experience's "invariant structures." Thus the phenomenological questions are not about how a particular person experiences the world (or how a particular player experiences the game), but about how is it possible for anyone to experience a world (or for any player to experience the game).

As the goal here is not psychotherapeutical, it is necessary to steer clear from solipsistic tendencies, which might turn the analysis from the first-person perspective into direct introspection. I emphasize the materiality of the single-player computer game artefact as something shared by all players and playings of a particular game. Perhaps the "invariant structures" of player's experience could be found from the relationship between the game and the player. But before such an attempt, we have to locate the other end in the relation.

On the processuality and materiality of a single-player computer game

In the interdisciplinary climate of games research, in which scholars studying single-player games share an assumedly common field with social scientists and anthropologists whose object of study is characterised by social aspects, it makes sense to interrogate the materiality of the computer game artefact as a potential foundation for the study of single-player computer games from the arts and humanities perspective. This position can be contextualised in relation to Malaby (2007: 102), who insists on a processual nature of computer games:

> "Every game is an ongoing process. As it is played, it always contains the potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself."

Malaby's examples include players negotiating what happens to parking fees in Monopoly and the introduction of new rules and tactics in sports, based on which he suggests that games are "grounded in human practice" and "therefore always in the process of becoming". This seems pretty straightforward in the context of multiplayer games, where the upholding of the correct procedure is (partially) in the hands of human players, and conventions about

acceptable practices exist as agreements between humans. However, the extent to which it holds in the case of single-player computer games seems worth exploring.

According to Laughlin (1993), an anthropologist studying rituals, suggests that "games are an amalgamation of play and ritual". This exemplifies a definition of a game that places no weight whatsoever on aspects of the materiality involved. I assume in a ritual a number of wares are utilised, but for the anthropologist their involvement is not definitive to what the notion of game corresponds to. Consider for example a game of *Qualat* (trad.), belonging to the *Mancala* (trad.) family, in which a fundamental mechanic is the picking-up a handful of little stones from one pit and 'sowing' them into subsequent pits on the board. Such games were, and perhaps still are, played by West African herdsmen using goat droppings as stones (called *til* when used as playware for *Qualat*) and hand-dug holes in the dry ground as pits. (Pankhurst 1971)

Compared to what the anthropologist, seeking to understand his object of study, the amalgamations of play and ritual, would gain from studying goat droppings and desert sand, a computer game scholar can gain much more *meaningful* insights on her object of study by looking at the 'dead matter' alone, the materiality of the game artefact involved. With "materiality of the game artefact" I refer to all aspects of the single-player computer 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.

The important difference between goat droppings in *Qualat* and the material game artefact of, say, *Tetris* (1985), is that the latter has the ability to transform as a consequence of in-game events. If a dry goat dropping gets crushed in the hands of a shepherd playing *Qualat*, it is an unfortunate accident, comparable to a power failure when playing *Tetris*, in that in both cases the materiality prevents the game from continuing. However, the goat dropping does not have the ability to prevent the game of *Qualat* from continuing as a consequence of the player's certain choices that owe their existence to the very same materiality. The game artefact of *Tetris*, on the other hand, will prevent the game from continuing if the blocks touch the top of the container. This is always the case, it is hard-coded in the binary executable file whose run-time behavior corresponds to what we know about how the game of *Tetris* plays out, and it is not possible for the players to change this by way of inventing "new practices".

An advocate of the "processual" perspective might perhaps now point at the practice of 'rocket-jumping' invented by players of first-person shooter (FPS) games. Rocket-jumping refers to using the recoil of a powerful projectile weapon to propel the avatar into jumps otherwise impossible. It seems lucid to admit that once rocket-jumping was invented, the playings of some first-person shooters changed drastically, not unlike a new interpretation of "Tuck rule" mentioned by Malaby (2007: 103) changed the ways in which American football was played. However, while playings of first-person shooters changed, the *conditions* by which those playings took place did not: the players merely became aware of new ways around the restrictions imposed by the game artefacts. Furthermore, the comparison to American football would perhaps be a bit misplaced, as in American football there is no materiality within which the conditions by which gameplay can unfold would be hard-coded.

Attempting to join 'the processual' and 'the material', perhaps we could describe game developer's habit of fixing games' bugs with patch releases as corresponding to a processual transformation in the context of single-player computer games. For example, when questioned in an interview about how the designers intended players of *Doom* (1993) to get into a

particular secret area, John Romero, the game's lead designer, recollects how a bug related to the accessibility of the area was fixed with a patch release after players had found about it. (Killough)

We can describe "processual" qualities in the ways how also single-player games are played (exemplified by rocket jumping), and we can observe that sometimes the material game artefacts of single-player games are adjusted to meet new practices of play (exemplified by patch releases). However, it would not seem a sensible to assume that single-player games, often having a definitive materiality, would be as malleable as multi-player games which, by definition, are upheld by social exchanges between players. (cf. Woods 2009: 205) Doing so would discount and undermine a body of knowledge to be gained by studying the material game artefact as it appears to the player.

If the notion of game one has adopted for the purposes of studying the phenomena we may call games cannot accommodate the definitiveness of the material, perhaps a way out would be to give up any claims of essential similarity between what we have become to know as "single-player computer games" and games in general. Sudnow (1984: 8) referring to single-player computer games like *Breakout* (1976), suggests that "perhaps [Atari] called them video 'games' only to avoid troubles with the Food and Drug Administration." If 'sociality' is retained as a defining characteristic that qualifies the usage of the notion of "game" to describe a phenomenon, perhaps single-player computer games should be taken as resembling Sudoku and crossword puzzles more than games. (cf. Woods 2007: 11-12).

Materiality and the 'transmedial argument'

Juul (2003: 30) defines games as "transmedial", meaning that they are not tied to any specific medium, and "can move between different media – sometimes with ease, sometimes with great difficulty" (Juul 2005: 48). Aarseth (2004) observes that "the computer is not a medium, but a flexible material technology that will accommodate many very different media. Hence, there is no 'computer medium' with one set of fixed capabilities, nor is there 'the medium of the computer game'."

According to what we might call a transmedial argument, *Chess* (trad), for example, is the same *Chess* regardless if it is played on a wooden board with ivory pieces (or with pieces that represent characters from Star Wars, for example), or on a computer. In the transmedial way of thinking, while the 'implementations' of the game may vary, the *idea* of *Chess* persists across the implementations. When speak of "*Chess*", we tend to refer to the transmedial *Chess*, not to any of its particular implementations.

The transmedial argument seems quite sensible in the context of games like *Chess* or *Qualat*, consisting of general rules which can be exhaustively described. It is possible for us to know how *Chess* should be implemented and to point out when computer makes a mistake in the implementation. However, the argument's self-evident sensibility diminishes when we try to apply it on games whose functionality we would have hard time describing exhaustively[5], as it brings in the ambiguous notions of a 'bug' and a 'glitch'.

[5] The difference between the kind of games here is certainly suggestive of the differences between emergence and progression games (cf. Juul 2002) and between games with infinite and finite teleologies (cf. Elverdam & Aarseth 2007). However, whether there is an essential connection remains to be interrogated.

The policemen in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* cannot swim, but the protagonist, CJ, controlled by the player can. In the early PC versions of the game, if CJ is chased by the policemen on foot, and the player makes him jump off from a cliff to the water, the policemen follow CJ and drown. Analysing the particular version of *GTA: SA,* we can conclude that the policemen are immensely stupid. However, their stupidity apparently was not a desired feature, as it was fixed in an update, presumably by tweaking the path-finding algorithms that control the policemen. (Chapanard)

It is ambiguous on which grounds can we read certain features as flaws. While the revision history of a particular game is quite powerful an authority concerning what is a flaw and what isn't, the origin of the 'ideal game' to which the implementation is compared to identify flaws is easily left unannounced. Perhaps the game developers are not publishing a revision history, perhaps the game is not supported by its developers any more, perhaps bugs remain unnoticed by developers or perhaps we misjudge features as bugs and vice versa.

Assuming 'an ideal game' to which particular implementations are compared opens the door for unnecessary weaknesses, such as considerations about authorial intent or "intentional fallacy" (cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley 2005, Barthes 1967). The author is known as a problematic figure in the context of computer games which are products of teams instead of single auteurs. Perhaps the author evoked in idealist game analysis would be equally an ideal author. More worryingly, the notion of "ideal game" introduces the danger of confusing utilitarian assumptions concerning with the game's functionality as a coherent whole with ideological-aesthetic assumptions about the cultural purpose of the game artefact.[6]

While at first sight the transmedial argument seems to be in contrast with an emphasis on the computer game's materiality, the two perspectives can be reconciled. Allegedly *Tetris*, too, comes in different guises. Wikipedia lists over 50 "variants of *Tetris*" for a different platforms.[7] Some of them are faithful to the Russian aesthetic, whereas some contain for example sexual imagery of varying crudeness and relevance to gameplay (cf. Leino 2007). Consider that we are to study *Tetris* from the transmedial perspective. Should we assume Alexey Pajitnov's original for Elektronika 60 as the *urtyp* that gives us the best access to the 'ideal Tetris' and focus our empirical efforts on it?

Juul asserts that (2005: 48) "there is no set of equipment or *material support* common to all games." It is hard to disagree about the lack of a common "computer game medium" across all games – at least describing a medium shared by both *Bejeweled* (2001) and *Leisure Suit Larry* (1987) would require watering down the significance in the notion of "medium". However, acknowledging that there is not necessarily any common "material support" or "medium" to *all games*, does not amount to renouncing the involvement of "material support" or "medium" in the cases of *particular games*. For example, since the version 1.3, *The Sims 3* (2009) has been a game in which babies will not be born to single parents. (The Sims 3 v.1.3 patch notes) It is crucial that we acknowledge the difference between the two games: *The Sims 3* pre and post the v.1.3 update, especially if we are to analyse what kind of ideas about parenting are implied in the game.

In this light, the transmedial idea of a game, such as that assumedly shared to a varying degree by all the numerous "*Tetris* variants", makes sense as a device of comparative game

[6] Perhaps I should file a bug report to Newsgaming.com: there seems to be a bug in September 12th that prevents me from killing all the terrorists.
[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Tetris_variants

analysis and criticism – not as an ontological claim. We can articulate meaningful differences between games unfolding based on their particular (however 'fluid', 'becoming' and 'processual') materialities by pointing out how they differ from the "transmedial game" we decide them to manifest. *Sex Tetris* (1996), for example, differs from the 'ideal Tetris' not only as the blocks represent humans, but also as the conditions by which blocks are cleared are slightly different from the usual.

Perhaps the transmedial *Tetris* is not to be found in any of the variants (including the original) but from somewhere *in between* them.[8] The transmedial *Tetris* is not accessible from the first-person perspective, because the player's experience always involves a particular *Tetris* game with its distinctive materiality. Here we can find an explanation for the difference between *studying a game by playing it* and *studying a game as played*. The former project assumes the empirical target of the scrutiny as most likely partial, perhaps also somewhat fallible, manifestation of its object of study, the "transmedial game". The latter project takes the empirical target constituting the object of study at face value.

'Gameplay' upon materiality from the player's perspective

Without going into the details we can acknowledge that the notion of "play" is applied to describe quite a number of different phenomena; ranging from the plays of Shakespeare via playing an accordion to playing poker and playing with one's life. Thus framing a scope of a study as "player's experience" would imply an impossibly broad endeavour.

Perhaps one could postulate a narrower category by speaking of computer game play: the activity that takes places upon or involves the artefacts we take as "computer games" could be referred to as computer game play. However, this route is slightly problematic as the computer game artefacts can be used for a number of activities other than playing the game. The definition landing all the responsibility on the involvement of the artefact would fail to capture any nuances in the kinds of activities it attempts to refer to: no distinction could be made between playing the game and playing *with* the game.

Holding on to the necessity of the involvement of the computer game artefact, however, makes sense given the project of understanding the player's experience as a relationship between a computer game and its player. But it is crucial for such project to be able to focus, among all the things that can be done with computer game, on playing them. So the difference between playing *with* and playing a computer game should be interrogated in more detail.

Gadamer (2001: 106) refers to play/games as "risks" for the player: The player "enjoys a freedom of decision which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited." He continues that "Even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk that they will not 'work', 'succeed', or 'succeed again', which is the attraction of the game." What does it mean for a task to "succeed" or "not to succeed" in the context of a game? Could we be more specific?

Allow me to try to describe these structures from the player's perspective. Some of my actions as a player of a game will allow me to do other kinds of (perhaps new kinds of) things in the game. As a consequence, whether direct or indirect, of some other actions of mine, however, continuing playing the game might be rendered as an impossibility. I can set myself

[8] This amounts to saying that the transmedial Tetris does not exist.

a task to replicate my real-life neighbourhood in *Sim City 4* (2003). Most likely if I succeed, the project leaves me with positive cashflow to be invested in future projects. However, I can "not succeed" in two ways. First, the neighbourhood might not look like the one surrounding the house in which I live in the real world. Second, in the process of building the neighbourhood, I may run out of cash.

The first kind of failure has no consequences whatsoever on the game's materiality. Perhaps, from the point of view of materiality, we should not call it a failure. However, the second kind of failure may lead to me be expelled from being the mayor of *SimCity 4*, especially if I have already used all the last resorts offered by the game. When I make choices as a player of a single-player computer game like *Sim City 4,* I subject them to be evaluated by the game, which can in turn, decide on the consequences my choices will have. Perhaps this exemplifies Gadamer's (2001: 106) idea of "endangered freedom".

The "endangered freedom" is not exclusive to computer games – if I am playing the game of throwing a ball against the wall so that it bounces via the floor in between my hand and the wall, in each throw I subject my actions to be evaluated against the "structure" (Gadamer 2001: 210) of the game. However, in the context of computer games this evaluation is done by the game artefact, which has the ability to change its material properties as a consequence of my actions, possibly rendering it impossible for me to continue playing. In contrast, the ball I could be bouncing could not make itself non-bouncable as a consequence of landing into my hand without touching the floor first.

This influence of the materiality to the activity of play can be articulated through Sartre's notion of "resistance". Sartre (2001: 505) observes that, freedom, as something one can enjoy, necessitates a world that "resists" one's actions. His definition of the resistance could be approximated as that which distinguishes between "wishing to do" and "choosing to do" things. In the materiality of *Sim City 4* the extent of my freedom is defined before I set out to play: some kinds of actions and their combinations are possible whereas others are not. If I could do whatever I wanted in *Sim City 4*, there might not be a significant difference between "wishing" and "choosing". That as a consequence of certain choices I can fail and be prohibited to continue playing *Sim City 4,* exemplifies that the game resists my actions, and that the notions of "choice", "success" and "failure" are meaningful in the specific context of *Sim City 4*.

The computer game *Sid Meier's Railroads!* (2006) has a "train table mode", behind which the idea is supposedly to provide a digital alternative for the real-life practice of occupying a garage with miniature train sets. However, there are no requirements for my performance – the materiality does not distinguish between "failure" and "success". Engaging in the playful activity upon the materiality set in the "train table mode" perhaps exemplifies the idea of playing "with" a game.

Perhaps the possibility for the player's choices to become meaningful (via the threat of failure and expulsion from the game) in relation to her responsibility for her freedom as a player, is what could be used to distinguish between playing and playing *with* a game. To make the distinction more precise, perhaps it could be made, on similar grounds, between *play* and *gameplay.* When engaged in 'mere' (solitary) play, it is in my powers to decide how long the activity should continue. When playing a (single-player) game, i.e. engaged in gameplay, the continuation of the activity depends on my choices as evaluated by the game. Thus the

difference between play and gameplay is that in gameplay, the continuation of the activity is at stake.

Suits (2005: 54) defines lusory attitude as "the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur". Given that I desire to play, and am willing to demonstrate the lusory attitude, the materiality of *Sim City 4* imposes on me a freedom of choice of which I am responsible in my choices. This is what we could refer to as the *gameplay condition*. We can assume that by virtue of being a player of a particular game, I, not unlike anyone else, experience game content (including goals) as significant in relation to the gameplay condition imposed by the game. Consider, for example, someone being able to clear several lines consisting of single-coloured blocks in *Tetris*. Anyone aware of the condition imposed by Tetris recognises such ability as remarkable.

Goals & enjoyment vs. gameplay condition & nourishment

"Goals" are often taken as the most fundamental structure delimiting the player's behaviour and experience. Lee (2003) stresses them as "ultimate fulfilling factor[s]" regarding the notion of computer game and in Juul's (2007) "Complete Theory of Video Games" they have direct influence on whether a particular player is having fun with the game in question. Players, assumedly, enjoy striving for goals if it does not provide too much of a challenge.

The problem for the explanatory framework emphasizing goals is that not all games have goals, and many of those that have, can be played without acknowledging the existence of the goal. For example, *SimCity* (1987), according to Juul (2007), has no goal at all. If trying to explain a playing of such game with the goal-framework, we would describe the situation so that the player herself has set the goal to strive for. Supposedly striving for a personal goal can be equally fun as striving for a pre-defined one. But we can observe that I am able to set my own goal and strive for it in *SimCity* only as long as I fulfil the gameplay condition. Furthermore, playing *SimCity* is enjoyable also without pausing to reflect on one's playing long enough to decide on a goal to strive for. A player of *SimCity* is not required to 'set a personal goal' to enjoy playing, let alone to play the game.

On the other hand, in many games (more specifically in those to which Juul [2007] refers as having "obligatory goals") what the game artefact requires the player to do in order to keep the activity from ending corresponds to what could be conceptualised as a "goal" of the game. Eager to bridge the first-person and third-person perspectives, one might be tempted to explain the gameplay condition as 'a kind of goal'. However, this mode of explanation would in certain cases turn the concept of goal upside down. For example, in Tetris it would amount to "avoid letting the blocks heap up too much".

Levinas (1969: 110) asserts that we life from "good soup", among other things. However, the "good soup" is not a "means of life", like a word processor is a means of writing a letter. Neither is "good soup" a "goal of life", like communication is the goal of writing a letter. In this light, perhaps one should not try to explain the gameplay condition as either "means" or "goal" of the activity of play. Levinas (ibid.), referring to what he calls *nourishment*, continues that "even if the content of life ensures my life, the means is immediately sought as an end, and the pursuit of this end becomes an end in its turn."

Consider again *Tetris*, from which Elverdam & Aarseth (2007) have somewhat hard time pointing out one particular goal: it seems to make sense to trace Levinas' steps and suggest

that we play *Tetris* to be able to keep playing it. But could we describe how enjoyment could be derived from such activity, involving seemingly endless struggle with no comforting closure? Perhaps we could – especially if we agreed with Levinas (1969: 110) that "enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity."

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