

God is a Game Designer – Accelerating ‘Existential Ludology’

Olli Tapio Leino

School of Creative Media
City University of Hong Kong
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong
+852 3442 4711
otleino@cityu.edu.hk

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper examines the applicability of existentialism as a framework for computer game epistemology, ontology and hermeneutics, and in doing so provides a much-needed complement to contemporary approaches making use of existentialist thought (e.g. Payne 2009, Leino 2012, Möring 2013, Leino & Möring 2015, Kania 2017). This paper argues that there is a fundamental incompatibility between existentialist frameworks and computer games, because existentialist frameworks emphasize ‘thrownness’ and ‘formlessness’ and deny the existence of god, whereas computer games are well-formed, designed by intelligent individuals and played by volunteers. The paper explores occasionalism – a branch of theological thought that acknowledges god as the original cause for events and as existing in moments of causation (Nadler 1992, 1993, 2000, Malebranche 1997) – as a possible solution to the problems encountered by existential ludology, including those pertaining to the relationship between materiality and authorship.

There appears to be a number of compelling reasons to embark on a project of "existential ludology". First, in terms of player’s experience, computer games often appear as self-contained realms in which to ‘exist’ and it is often productive to consider them "worlds" (e.g. Vella 2015). Secondly, as many contemporary games of especially the open-world or “creamy middle” (Aarseth 2012) kind, contain what some refer to as “emergence” (Juul 2002) – i.e. events which could not have been foreseen in their exact form by the designer—it sometimes seems unnecessary to bring in the author. Thirdly, computer games afford ‘natural-scientific’ explanations on different levels of abstraction, very much like the real world does: we can describe computer games as behaving according to rules hard-coded into their material existence (e.g. Consalvo 2005), and if we wanted to dig deeper than mere empiricism, we could resort to platform studies (e.g. Montfort & Bogost 2009) as the equivalent of cosmology and quantum physics of game worlds. Fourthly, the use of existentialist frameworks which avoid reference to god as the origin of meaning in the world appears sensible also in relation to paradigm of textual

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and technological hermeneutics, with their notions like "authorial intent fallacy" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 2005, Barthes 1967) or "designer fallacy" (Ihde 2008).

However, there are also significant differences. First, despite containing some events manifesting 'emergence', computer games are not, overall, "dizzying formlessness of existence" (Sartre 2005, 505). Rather, they are engineered products crafted by trained professionals, some of whom (QA department) get paid exactly for removing, through meticulous testing and re-engineering, any remaining traces of formlessness. (However, mentioning the "author" or their intentions within contemporary debates in philosophy of computer games is easily associated with game design research/anthropology or misplaced narrativism.) Secondly, players are not "thrown" (compare: Heidegger 2008), into the world, but by definition, engage in the activity voluntarily (compare: Huizinga 1971). As a consequence, existential perspectives holding "materiality" as the highest origin of significance, often run into trouble when encountering ambiguity through boundary-seeking play and end up making what seem like irrational statements about the difference between intended and unintended features in games (e.g. Leino 2012).

Theorizing in the spirit of accelerationism (Noys 2008, Mackay & Avanesian 2014), this paper pushes the existential-ludologists' metaphor further on its logical trajectory, and asks: is reconciliation of these positions possible? Is it possible simultaneously to hold an epistemological attunement to "materiality" (i.e. that which exists) and "worldness" (i.e. that in which players exist) of computer games, and, to acknowledge the designer as an arbitrator of meaning? Intuitively, yes: games are "machines" rather than texts (Aarseth 1997), and there can be "meaning" in their functionality (Bogost 2008). The author, then, could perhaps appear as a Malebranchian (1997, 205) watchmaker, the 'occasionalist' god appearing within the cause-and-effect relations.

The paper seeks to acknowledge, on the one hand, the game has material existence and is a "world" that contains "emergence" and in which players can "exist", and, on the other hand, that the game-world has indeed been designed, and players are not "thrown" into but voluntarily enter the world and that many of them commit their 'lives' to uncovering the fate that the designer has created for them. More specifically, this amounts to exploring at what kind of ontology of and hermeneutics for computer games we can arrive, if we posit an [implied] player that believes in a occasionalist designer-god as the origin of events and arbitrator of meaning in the computer game. Could this kind of analysis avoid the obvious shortcomings of existential ludology?

At least two interrelated phenomena appear especially relevant as examples to be further analysed to explore the proposed position.

First: boundary-seeking activities. Aarseth (2007) proposed "transgressive play" as a term to describe the kind of play through which the players seek to establish themselves against the "tyranny of the game". The boundary-seeking activities and the considerations they are accompanied by, seem to, at least

initially, resemble the seeking carried out by people engaging on religious pursuits. What happens if the boundary-seeking activities lead to disillusionment, as if one is abandoned by the designer-god (cf. *NKJV Bible*, Psalms 22:2). If this experience motivates a new interpretation of, a new ‘way of being’ in the game world, much like Malaby’s (2007) notion of games in becoming, is it the equivalent of transcendence? More importantly, what does it tell us about the balance of power in the relationship between designer/author, material/text, and user/reader (cf. Wimsatt & Beardsley 2005, Barthes 1967, Ihde 2008)

Secondly: the ambiguity between a bug and a feature. Consider Myers’ (2008) account of being chased by an angry mob due to playing *City of Heroes* (2004) according to what he thought was the rules. The problem of ‘how is this game to be played’ encountered by Myers intertwines at least authorial intent and functionality. To solve it, do we trust the haphazard hermeneutics of a witch-hunting mob of angry gamers? Is organized “theorycrafting” (Karlsen 2011) a reliable exegetic practice? Can cosmology of platform studies help, like it helped Lederle-Ensign et al. (2015) to uncover what Rohrer (2007) meant with the treasure chests in *Passage*?

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