Between Action and Inaction:
A Distant-Play Reading of
The Longing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper offers a phenomenological distant-play (Fizek 2022) reading of *The Longing* (Studio Seufz 2020), an underexplored semi-idle game that challenges traditional gameplay paradigms through its metareferential, philosophical, and contemplative structure. Our central argument is that *The Longing* uses its unconventional mechanics to explore themes of time, agency, and existential longing, thereby offering a distinct commentary on how contemporary players engage with themes of spatio-temporality, passivity, and self-realization at the intersection of literary and ludic experiences.

Released during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time marked by global isolation and uncertainty—the game remediates the Kyffhäuser myth (or 'the king in the mountain' trope). The player-controlled "Shade" in the game is tasked with waiting in the mountain caves for 400 real-time days until the king awakens. Throughout the entire game, a countdown is displayed at the top of the screen, serving as a constant reminder of the passage of time (see Figure 1). This countdown begins as soon as the game is launched and continues to progress in real-time, even when the game is not running. With its deliberate ultra-slow pacing, *The Longing* transforms waiting into a central mechanic, placing the player at both literal and metaphorical crossroads between action and inaction, engagement and detachment, compliance and defiance.

Figure 1: Screenshot from early game. The countdown shows that 399 days, 23 hours, 10 minutes, and 34 seconds of 400 days remain.

Our paper adopts a triadic, interdisciplinary methodology through a conversation between a philosopher, a literary scholar, and a ludologist. This combined approach is necessary to transcend existing ludoliterary frameworks (Ensslin 2014) and account for divergent, embodied play experiences (Keogh 2018). By analyzing *The Longing* from these three perspectives unified under distant-play, we highlight its "unnatural" spatio-temporality (Ensslin and Bell 2021; Igarzábal 2019), metaleptic bookishness (Aksay et al. 2024; Pressman 2020), and its complex interpassive relationships between player, player-character, and game world (Fizek 2022).

The game's structure ties the act of waiting with both the narrative and the mechanics, creating a shared experiential connection between the player and the player character. *The Longing* presents a rare case in which diegetic (in-game) time largely aligns with non-diegetic (real-world) time. Although players can influence the passage of diegetic time through specific in-game actions—including speeding it up, slowing it down, or halting it entirely—there are no conventional fast-travel systems or maps to navigate the caves. Access to many areas requires patience, as shifts in the game world occur slowly, such as moss growing or water droplets forming a lake. The Shade's 'home' in one of the caves, which players can customize to create a more personalized environment (see Figure 2), is one of the few locations where the progression of in-game time can be manipulated. Thus, the home serves not only as the "locus of hestial dwelling" (Vella 2019, 154), offering a safe refuge from the slowness of "endless wandering" (Kagen 2022, 132-136) in search of new paths in the caves, but also as a site where the character's subjective experience of time is represented. This reinforces the game's thematic emphasis on temporal perception, enhancing the player's awareness of the passage of time within and beyond the game.

Figure 2: The Shade's home can be customized with objects found throughout the caves, including paintings, books, and a playable clarinet-like instrument. The acceleration of in-game time relative to the number of decorations in this space suggests that time is perceived as passing more quickly in enriched, pleasurable environments.

One of the activities that the Shade can engage in at home, which is particularly significant for our paper, is reading. As the game progresses, the Shade can gradually fill a bookshelf by collecting books found throughout the caves. Most of these books are public domain titles integrated into the game, but players also have the option to add their own texts or other books into the game. As the Shade reads, the in-game interface displays the text, allowing players to follow along. However, players are not required to engage with the text if they only wish to speed up the in-game time. By simply flipping the pages, which advances time by one minute with each turn, players can progress the game time without actually reading the content. This creates an intriguing dynamic between active and passive attention: while players physically interact with the game (by clicking to turn the pages), they can either engage cognitively with the text or use it solely as a tool to manipulate time. The game thus presents a form of "attention ecology" (Citton 2016), where players can either mirror the Shade's behavior by keeping occupied with reading or direct their focus to the distracted character and the passing of time. This dynamic reflects the interplay between attention, agency, and temporality in both the game and the player's own experience. At the same time, reading, like the manipulation of in-game time, disarticulates the player and the Shade, producing a sense of disembodiment.

Nonetheless, the act of reading symbolizes the Shade's longing and becomes a meaningful mode of gameplay. Reading in the game aligns with the themes of will and perseverance referenced in many texts embedded in the game. The inclusion of works such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) in the Shade's library ties directly to *The Longing*'s broader philosophical themes, mirroring the myth of Barbarossa and the character's quest for purpose and self-realization. More broadly, the inclusion of these texts emphasizes the game's metareferentiality (Wolf 2009) and intertextuality, underscored by the Shade's notes on the last pages of the books, usually hinting at the paths leading to the game's multiple endings. The game's perhaps most literal crossroads arise as the player approaches the end of the 400 days of solitude, where they must decide whether to obey the king's command and awaken him at the end of the period, escape—an option with its own branching paths of potential failure and success—or continue to live in the caves, choosing not to awaken the king at all.

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