

## A position paper for the PhD-seminar “Computer Game Research - Theory and Method”

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Working title of the thesis:  
Emotions in Play – an existential-phenomenological study

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing demographical diversity among the players of computer games and the purposes for which games are designed create new kinds of expectations toward games. Simultaneously, the medium’s constraints set by the technology are decreasing. Even so, games are easily paralleled with early movies of spectacle, whose makers had not yet discovered all the emotional possibilities the medium has to offer (Loftus 2006.) A common misconception is that an epic fantasy game that succeeds in making player shed tears is a properly emotional game. Instead of games resorting solely to remediated cheap tricks, I’d like to see games that take the best practices of traditional narrative media and complement them with the full range of capabilities of the game medium, such as interfaces, player-to-player dynamics, elements of uncertainty, and so on. Despite the intent to provide knowledge relevant to industry my project is not design research, but basic research on how computer games are being played. The topic of my project are emotions in play; the emotional dimension of the relationship between the players and the game; the subjective emotional experience of playing a computer game. Its aims are **1) to theorize and describe the conditions under which a computer game can be held responsible for its player’s emotions** in order to **2) describe the ways in which features of the computer game medium can be used to elicit emotional experiences in the players.** The first step is necessary to avoid the pitfalls of solipsism (it’s all in the players head) and situatedness (it’s all about the context). The second step should then be fairly easy compared to the first.

### ON EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The access to emotions in this project comes from them being conscious states of mind and thus *intentional*, experienced by a human against a certain *facticity*. The game artefacts come into the picture as intentional objects constituting (or contributing to the constitution of) a facticity within which the player performs agency as she plays.

Intentionality here refers to the fact that one cannot have a mere emotion without it being a relation between the subject and an object. For example, fear is always fear of something. Differentiating between emotions is possible only by taking the objects into account. In this understanding, a fear of a bogeyman is different emotion than a fear of a murloc. A notable feature of intentionality is its existence-independence; which means that an emotion does not pose any requirements regarding the existence of its object. Thus we can be afraid of bogeymen, dogs and murlocs alike. What emotions one experiences and when depends in part on the beliefs one has in place and as such they can be framed as judgements, too. This is what Solomon (2007) refers to when he says that the more one cares about the object, the stronger the emotion. The potential pitfalls here is identified by Goldie (2002); “knowing that X is fearful” is “different from being afraid of X”. Solomon (1977) had a rather comprehensive view; he did not speak of single beliefs behind single emotion, but defined there being an *ideology of an emotion* behind each and every emotion. Thus it is sensible that theorizing about emotions becomes a project of explaining why intentionality has taken the form it has taken.

Acknowledging the existence-independence principle may seem like leading to some kind of solipsist way of thinking within which we cannot make any claims regarding the objects of the emotions as they do not necessarily exist. However, drawing on Sartre we are able to a meaningful extent discuss the conditions by which we exist in the world, the background against which we act and which limits what we can and cannot do. An example from the realm of game studies would be that one cannot, factually, grow flowers in GTA IV. Thus we can take facticity as the ultimate framework against which one can make sense of the ideologies of emotions.

The existentialists claim that we dwell in human condition, we are bound choose; as Sartre has put it; even suicide is a choice. (Sartre 2003) (so is quitting a game, by the way.) Thus human emotions can be framed as experienced against a facticity within which death is among the ultimate consequences of one’s choices. Being robbed by an armed thug involves fear relation to the risk of injury and death involved, for example. Postulating alternate facticities, as various brackets into which the human “enters” as she begins play and thus becomes a player, and against which experiences her emotions, based on analyses of game content seems like a fruitful approach to unpack the ideologies emotions. Imagination and experienced agency seem like key concepts here, particularly cases when meaningful correlation between them can be described; e.g. when imagined objects can become manifested within the game due to the player’s actions. Thinking of alternative facticities also leads to interesting questions to be asked; for example; does the fact that the players play the games voluntarily and can quit any time affect their emotions? Do they have to deny this

(to engage in *bad faith* would Sartre (2003, 2005) say) in order to enjoy playing games that evoke a broad range of emotions from positive to negative?

## **ON PLAY**

In the existing literature play has been discussed as both an activity and an attitude. The difference between activity and attitude is, how I see it, that the activity we can analyse with methods aspiring to be an external, objective and invisible eyes where as of the attitude only indications or symptoms can appear to an objective eye. An interesting point of comparison here is Apter's (1992) work within the realm of reversal theory, where he, to summarize, discusses the phenomena of being playful at work and dutiful when playing a game. For example, Caillois (2001) can be read as taking the attitude as his starting point, as he claims that "play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement" (ibid., 6).

In play we can enjoy things that would otherwise lead to negative emotions; negative emotions of high arousal can be experienced as positive if we are in the playful mode of experiencing (within the protective frame), goes Apter's claim. I am not sure if I agree completely, but it seems that the attitude of play does interesting things to the ways in which we relate to the world. 21<sup>st</sup> century game studies has in my opinion, emphasized play as an activity, through postulating games primarily as artefacts or texts and thus carving the space for the player by objective means and by doing so simultaneously ignored the fact that playing and game are of fundamentally different kind. For example, what Juul's "Classical Game Model" (2003) affords for the player is the binary disposition of being either happy or sad when the game ends. For Salen & Zimmerman (2004, 303-305), a kitten is a valid player and we can observe how a kitten plays. Their view seems to imply that would be feasible to exploit methods we use for analysing kittens' play to analysing humans play'.

Computer game play can be fruitfully postulated as formalised interaction (ibid.), for example, but it also can, and often does, transcend the object upon which its events partly unfold. For example, players of Civilization IV may make diplomatic agreements without the game knowing anything about them; in other words; computer game play can take "states" which are incompatible with the game's "state machine". If game is taken as "that which is played", the previous example breaks the paradigm of computer game studies that a computer game would consist of all the states of the state machine.

However it would not be wise to claim that the established knowledge about computer game play as an activity would not be relevant for my study, but as I am interested in the subjective experiences, I must have position which does not fetishize the game artefact and from which it is epistemologically sustainable to address both the pre-personal activity of play and the subjective attitude of play.

Play as an attitude seems to have a lot to do with imagination, which fills the gaps in the artefact. If we have an emotion while playing, say, joy when finding a particular kind of car in GTA, the object of the emotion is not necessarily the car as it appears to an objective analysis, but the car that resembles the car the player has always wanted to own, for example. Even if we know a door cannot be opened (cf. Aarseth 2005), we might still, with the power of imagination, treat it as a door that could be opened. For example: we can enjoy “driving in a city” instead of “driving on a single road” in the early iterations of *Test Drive*, while perfectly knowing that we cannot turn left or right from any of the intersections, if those even ever would appear in front of us. However this is so far mere imagination with no manifestation in the material world, and I am uncertain how to prepare for confronting such phenomena without opening the floodgates of solipsism; so far my best guess is that at the overlaps of agency afforded by the game and agency experienced by the player the objects residing solely in the player’s imagination can make sense in relation to what we know about the game.

## **ON GAMES AS PLAYED**

Despite that my work has its presumed goal in understanding the player, the tradition within which it is anchored is computer game studies and thus my focus is on games, insofar that the ultimate goal is of the project is to be able to say something about games as objects of players’ emotions.

Supposedly based on analyses of game content one can arrive at a description of the facticity an individual game requires its players to enter and of the ideologies the individual game requires its players to adopt for their emotions.

However, the game content one experiences as objects of one’s emotions may not correspond to that game content that is visible through a ludological looking glass. What appears important to an objective analysis may not be as important for the subjective experience. That is why my area of interest can be framed more accurately as *games as played*. The difference between games and games as played is perhaps well illustrated with a parallel to Ihde’s technological artefacts, *technofacts*, which exist not only by their material being, but also by their use contexts. This is why

a mere ontological analysis of what the object “is” is not adequate to describe a technological artefact. What I see as one of the greatest achievements of 21<sup>st</sup>-century computer game studies so far is the establishment of rigorous methods for assessing what games are, we have, to name a few, models of interrelations between game elements, studies of different ontological classes of game content and typologies with which we can rigorously differentiate one game from another. I am in the process of finding out what kind of “adapter” is needed between the two epistemologically incompatible bodies of knowledge; how the existing knowledge on games as independent objects of study can be applied for understanding how players experience the games. Can such thing as experiential ludology exist and if it does, what are the limits of its knowledge? As soon as this epistemological adapter is constructed the project can supposedly proceed with rather traditional methods of computer game analysis.

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