TRANSCENDENCE
THROUGH PLAY

Even though philosophers like Kant and Schiller of the aesthetic tradition never had the opportunity to troll some noobs in Call of Duty or slay a dragon in Skyrim, their views on the concept of play can be critical to our understanding of how the player relates to the game world. **Dr Daniel Vella** *explores the work of aesthetic and existential philosophers. Words by* **Jasper Schellekens.**

Professional philosophy is often imagined as the realm of musty rooms full of Delphic books and stuffy university professors in tweed jackets or the future unemployed. Modern philosophy is a technocrat's game, with work in the field mostly done by researchers publishing in highly technical, peer-reviewed journals in specialised niches. The field of digital games is one of these niches, coming into its own as fertile ground for philosophy—and the Institute of Digital Games (IDG, University of Malta) is keen to explore.

Philosophy is key to analysing digital games. By giving us the tools to study the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, it lies at the heart of much of the work the IDG does. Prof. Gordon Calleja has worked with Ubisoft on game immersion. Dr Stefano Gualeni, recently featured in the magazines TH!NK (see issue 20) and *Kotaku*, explores the ethics of creating AI that is worthy of moral consideration, while working on a new game that plays with the concept of indexicality (the indexing of an object in context). Together with Dr Daniel Vella, he is now looking into the idea of existential projects in the work of Heidegger and Sartre, examining an individual's ability to project themselves into a certain kind of being.

Vella's area of expertise is the examination of the player's relation to his game avatar. He is currently dissecting the philosophical notion of play and how various philosophers across the centuries have claimed that it allows the player to transcend beyond who they actually are in real life. Kind of like that magical time during childhood when our unbridled imagination could turn us into anything we wanted to be.

WHAT IS THE WHAT?

To effectively dissect a video game, you have to be able to break it down into its component parts. The branch of philosophy referred to as ontology addresses what entities exist and how such entities may be grouped, related within a hierarchy, and subdivided according to similarities and differences. In a way, it can be considered the 'dictionary' of philosophy, as philosophers come up with names for these entities in order to make referring to them easier. Applied to the study of digital games, it lets us draw the border lines between the player and the avatar, between reality and the game world—and you'd be surprised how difficult it is to determine those borders.

Studying the relationship between the player and the game world can teach us a lot about how games impact individuals, how to evaluate games critically, and even our own relationship with reality. After all, to make a good game, you need to know how your audience will interact with it. To evaluate a game, you need to understand how the parts interlink and agree on what to call them. To understand reality, you can observe phenomena that happen in virtual environments and extrapolate from there. In his most recent research, Vella has mapped out a route that starts in concepts set out by aesthetic philosophers and then continues by reflecting on existentialist philosophers to finally arrive at a meaningful analysis of how an individual experiences play in a fictional game world. The map can then be used as groundwork for the understanding of how a player can be engaged in the game to take on the role of the avatar—and how the taking-on of this new identity in the virtual world reflects back on their identity in the actual world.

AESTHETICS - KANT
BEAUTY BE FREE

The start of Vella's path required an understanding of aesthetics, the branch of philosophy that studies beauty and taste. It emerged in the 18th century with the seminal works *Critique of Judgement* by Kant and *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* by Schiller. Aesthetics focuses on the study of beauty, which is understood not as being in the eye of the beholder, but rather as an objective judgement.

Kant and Schiller conclude that beauty and freedom are intrinsically linked. Although the particular relationship to play is mainly implied, it is worth following their logic on how beauty and freedom are connected because it is on that same crossroads that play finds itself. And this sense ❯

of freedom provides the foundations for existentialist philosophers and ultimately the work of Vella.

Kant and Schiller see beauty as resulting from breaking the chain of cause and effect and having no motivation outside of itself. Kant argues that freedom is attained where reason overcomes the senses. The individual is satisfied in its own thinking regardless of the input provided by the senses and therefore it is free. Schiller sees it less as a victory of one over the other. Instead he believes that freedom occurs where the rational and the sensual overlap. Normally the rational would constrain the external impulses of the world by making the claim of caution (do not climb up that tower Ezio, you could plummet to your death), or the external impulses would constrain the rational because they have no other choice (Oh Ezio, you jumped, I guess we'll have to get a cleaning crew to clean up the splat you left behind). But when they are united in play, they cancel each other out which leads to freedom, as the player is no longer imprisoned by cause and effect. While playing a game you know that rationally your actions will have a particular effect, but the impact is no longer governed by necessity. Go ahead and jump from that tower into the haystack, Ezio.

THE EXISTENTIALISTS - FINK ABOUT THE PLAYWORLD

Existentialists Fink and Sartre rework aesthetic dualism (rational vs physical) in existential terms: for the existentialists, the duality is only perceived. Individuals are able to take themselves, as subjects, and make themselves the object, meaning they are able to step outside of themselves and contemplate what they are doing from an almost external point of view. In this way, they are able to extend beyond themselves, allowing their consciousness to transcend their own material restrictions.

Sartre and Fink both explicitly acknowledge the importance of play. In Sartre's view, during play the individual is no longer determined by external reality (the sensual world) because as a player, they have the freedom to set their own tasks, demands, and expectations. The object the player is playing with still exists in external reality, but the act of playing with it makes it more than just that original object. Although the gamepad in the player's hand is still just a gamepad, it can, for example, be a gun at the same time. Therefore it can be argued to be more than just a gamepad.

This leads us to Fink about the playworld: a place where fictional actions are portrayed by actions in reality. The fictional action of shooting zombies in a game happens through pushing the R1 button on the gamepad. In the playworld, the player becomes an imaginary character, one that is different from the player and hence allows the player to be someone else.

This brings us back to that magical time of childhood where we were nothing but unbridled potential, and nothing actual. As we grow, we're confronted with the fact that life is (spoiler alert) finite and therefore with every second that passes the realm of possibilities shrinks. In play, it is no longer necessary for the individual playing to be constrained by the rules governing their life and the ever-decreasing realm of possibility. The playworld becomes a place where the imaginary is placed inside the actual. The individual playing the game becomes both a player (who they are in reality) and a role (the character they are playing in the playworld).

To illustrate this point with an example, imagine you are playing at

An individual playing a game is both themselves and someone else at the same time.

In the Playworld you put the fictive in a container of the actual - Fink

Dr Daniel Vella

being a valiant knight defending the serfs on your manor from a gang of bandits. In this scenario, you might use a device with a motion sensor that you will wield as a sword to fend off the bandits. This device is real, but in the playworld it is a knight's sword, which isn't real. In any case, you fend off a bandit attack with the skill and panache of a skilled swordsman, regardless of the fact that you have never held a blade in your life. By taking on this role in the game, you have transcended yourself and become more than you are. Through play you have become a valiant knight and skilled sword-fighter. This very transcendence is what Sartre and Fink refer to as the freedom to be other than themselves, hence play is a route to freedom.

TRANSCENDENCE - YOU CAN BE MORE THAN YOURSELF

Making a game without understanding how players interact with the playworld is like navigating without a map in a foreign country. If you're lucky, you may eventually get to your destination, but you'll probably end up wasting a lot of time going around in circles. By dissecting the

notion of play through the work of aesthetic and existential philosophers, we gain a better understanding of how a player interacts with the gameworld and where that boundary lies. In the same vein as a writer who needs to know which words to use to tug at the heartstrings of their reader, a game designer has to understand which game mechanics they can use to tug at the heartstrings of their players. They need to understand how players will react when a certain game mechanic is used. Fully understanding this interaction can even make the dreaded quicktime event—the 'push this button quickly or die' type events—an effective game mechanic because you can unlock how the player interacts with the game world and its rules. A quicktime event for shooting a zombie would be yawn-inducing, but it might work for a particularly cinematic sequence where the designers want to stretch the rules of the world.

An individual playing a game is both themselves and someone else at the same time. They become the character, and by becoming the character, they transcend beyond themselves. They take on the goals, history, or traits of

whomever they are playing as, and by doing so, they break reality's grip on the realm of possibility (Yes Johnny, even you can become an astronaut despite the fact that you haven't seen the night sky from your mother's basement since November). So even though the character in the game is performing the actions in the playworld, the individual is also performing actions in reality. Whether that is pressing a button on a gamepad or swinging a device at imaginary bandits, they are still actively interacting through a real object with the game world. This type of detailed examination also has interesting implications regarding the effects of play on a gamer's psychology, beyond just game design. Take the effect of violent games on players. Since players feel that they are external observers and not their real selves when playing a game, violent video games do not have the same impact as violence itself.

Individuals during play are still themselves. After all, people don't mutate into something else when they play a game. At the same time, they are not themselves within the playworld and take decisions they never would in reality. Few people would try and jump off that medieval tower into the haystack expecting to survive, but you as the character would. So when you do take that leap of faith, you become more than your actual self at the press of a button—so walk to the edge, push the d-pad forward, and press L1 and X. 🇹

Further reading:
Gualeni, S. 2018, (forthcoming). "A Philosophy of doing in the digital". In Romele, A. and Terrone, E. (eds.). Basingstoke (UK): Palgrave Macmillan

Gualeni, S. .2017 "VIRTUAL WELTSCHMERZ - things to keep in mind while building experience machines and other tragic technologies". In Silcox, M. (ed.), Experience Machines: The Philosophy of Virtual Worlds. London (UK): Rowman and Littlefield International.