Between "Live" and "Tell":
The Suspension of Freedom

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> "In the interim, I wonder, did they assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses,
> marking the geography with a superimposed significance;
> that they could actually walk the bible and inhabit its contradictions?"
> *Dear Esther*

> "I do not know whether the whole world has suddenly shrunk
> or whether I am the one who unifies all sounds and shapes:
> I cannot even conceive of anything around me being other than what it is."
> *Nausea*

Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea* describes "an adventure" (Sartre 2007: 36-37) as the "way of happening" where "living" and "telling" are intertwined. While, according to Sartre, an adventure never happens in life, I argue that it becomes possible when playing a computer game. To explore the idea of adventure, I examine *Dear Esther* and *The Path*: two special productions that are situated halfway between the adventure game and not-game genres. I investigate these games as a designed way of happening, which is, using Sartrean terms, determined by the characteristics of consciousness and world, and their relationship. Freedom for Sartre is a synonym for an attitude of consciousness that relates to an absurd world. Moreover, freedom constitutes a basis for individual sensemaking, and determines the possible activities performed by consciousness. The suspension of freedom, which I argue is specific to gaming experience, enables the player to have an adventure. Since the game world does not share with reality the quality of "having to much content" (Sartre 2007: 107), it is reconcilable with human consciousness. While human freedom is an activity of making sense of actions and events, meaning in a game is imposed rather than created by the player. Moreover, in a game there is no place for the free realisation of an individual or existential project, because the player's perspective is determined by an avatar that represents their character. In summary, this kind of game, can be considered a real-time adventure happening in a designed, limited world; it is experienced by a "player-in-a-game", who is able to make choices, but their freedom is ultimately suspended in its existential dimension.

***Nausea*: Live or Tell**

The protagonist of *Nausea*, Roquentin, wanders aimlessly through the streets of Bouville, where little is happening. He witnesses normal, everyday life: there are no special emotions, no perceivable meaning, no spectators nor listeners. From the first-person perspective, Roquentin experience a chaotic set of sensations and mundane activities. His life has "too much content", but there is nothing special in it, it is never named nor interpreted in real time. While trying to write a biography of the Marquis de Rollebon, Roquentin gradually realises that life cannot be aptly described (cf. Sartre 2007: 12-13).

While reminiscing his past, Roquentin dreams of an adventure, speculating on how it might begin:"The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity" (Sartre 2007: 36). When the adventure begins, life becomes infused with meaning, it engages the listener just like a melody. An adventure surprises Roquentin with unexpected situations, it offers him a place in a well-composed wholeness.[1] When the adventure happens, it provides the feeling of being immersed in a stream of meaningful events, instead of an absurd world. The human takes part in these events, but is not the creator of them – everything falls into place, but actions do not cause the adventure, nor determine its course.

Roquentin explains that the adventure cannot be repeated: "Following this gold spot with my eyes I think I would accept-even if I had to risk death, lose a fortune, a friend-to live it all over again, in the same circumstances, from end to end. But an adventure never returns nor is prolonged" (Sartre 2007: 37). Adventures then, cannot be relived, but new ones could happen, and Roquentin can only wait for them to take away the burden of needless freedom.

For Roquentin, the experienced string of life events is not the adventure, yet life causes nausea, as there is always more happening than he needs. Roquentin suddenly realizes that the adventure emerges only when we perceive life from the distance of time, but in the reminiscence "we forget that the future was not yet there; the man was walking in a night without forethought, a night which offered him a choice of dull rich prizes, and he did not make his choice" (Sartre 2007: 39).

The adventure is a special quality of happening that seems to make life meaningful and fascinating. Unfortunately, it becomes available only as a tale or recollection; and even then the adventure lacks immersion, and feels falsified:

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[1] Here Sartre follows the Aristotelian definition of the wholeness in drama: "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Aristotle 2008: VII, cf. Laurel, 1993).

"This is what I thought: for the most banal event to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story" (Sartre 2007: 38).

He tries "to live his own life as if he were telling a story" but never succeeds because life takes place in an absurd world, and all the meaning he can find is of his own creation. The situation determines the perspective of perception that he forms. Therefore, an actor cannot say what is important in a certain moment: while the action takes place everything is equally important. Moreover, the man living in an absurd world is also "condemned to freedom" (Sartre 1978: 485): the possibility and necessity of making choices that are not justified by any external system of values. In Sartrean thought even passivity is consequential: it means ceasing an activity. Freedom then, is unbearable and necessary, it is synonymous with the human condition, consciousness, nothingness and non-identity (Sartre 1978: 78-9, 85,95, 102, 125, 181, 201). Freedom can only be escaped from in the arts and storytelling, which engages the imagination and memory, but not perception,[2] while moving the consciousness into the sphere of irreality (cf. Kania 2014, 2011).

Storytelling gives some support for the human freedom. Events, when narrated, gain special meaning: they become interesting and promising, they tempt and enthral. Moreover, literature saves the reader from the absurdity of Sartre's world, and the condition of necessity of making sense of it. A described situation is understandable as opposed to life events. Literature, arts, the imagination and memory opens the irreality zone where everything is meaningful, where there is no room for existential dilemmas based on choice and decision: that suspends the freedom. Nevertheless, storytelling also has faults: it fails to give an opportunity to experience the adventure. The major fault of the story is the lack of interactivity.[3] Furthermore, the beginning is dependent on the ending, as Roquentin explains: "In reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning" (Sartre 2007: 38).

According to Roquentin, adventures happen in books, but in books they cannot be participated. Adventures are parts of biography, not life, but nevertheless, Roquentin still wants this "way of happening" – the meaningfulness built into events, not imposed on them *post factum*:

"I had imagined that at certain times my life could take on a rare and precious

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[2] In later works, Sartre changed his attitude on literature, where its escapist dimension now becomes an engaged art form that influences reality (cf. Sartre 1949).
[3] Marie-Laure Ryan writes that immersion in literature excludes interactivity and vice versa. Examples of interactive literature would be postmodernist novels that play with the position of the reader, and examples of immersive texts would be XIX century novels (cf. Ryan 1999)

quality. […] I have suddenly learned, without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. And naturally, everything they tell about in books can happen in real life, but not in the same way. It is to this way of happening that I clung so tightly" (Sartre 2007: 36).

He also wants to preserve the interactivity and chronology of events that make them surprising; and to make motivated and justified choices.

An Adventure

If Sartre's protagonist was placed in a contemporary setting, he would not need "to risk death, lose a fortune" or "a friend" to fulfil an adventure. I will now examine the ways Roquentin might achieve his adventure through computer games.

Here I focus on two games, *Dear Esther* by The Chinese Room, and *The Path* by Tale of Tales, which both take place in believable fictional environments. The position of the player in these games is similar to the position of being-in-the-world (Leino 2010: 11). Nevertheless, I do not focus on the person playing the game, but on the processual ontology of the game, which makes the person the player, and – for the time of playing – influences their humanity.

I would like to point out that I am not addressing all computer games. Both of the examined games can be classified somewhere between adventure games and not-games (cf. Samyn 2011). I limit my argument here to single player games, mainly because in the early work of Sartre, the meaning of the world and particular events is not created from the interaction between human beings, but rather between the individual consciousness and the world.(cf. Sartre 2007: 75, Sartre 1978: 79-84). The discussed games are characterised by limited interactivity, elaborate semantic layers, a lack of hard challenges, and intention of supplying the players with rich, multidimensional experiences. In other words, I consider these games as an aesthetically designed way of happening, which can be experienced as real-time adventures.[4]

I think that the distinctive features of *Dear Esther* and *The Path* can be encapsulated by using the categories discussed by Leino: a distinction between "playing a game" or "gameplay" on the one hand, and "playing with a game" or just "play" on the other (Leino 2009: 10-11). In his approach, when playing a game, the player makes free and meaningful choices that can make them responsible for their actions, and the continuation of the game is at stake. When

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[4] For examples of games that enable players to experience the adventure by exploring the environment, including the meaningful elements of biography or story, see the following: *Trauma* (2011); *The Graveyard* (2008); *The Path* (2009); *To the Moon* (2011); *Dinner Date* (2010); *The Call of the Fireflies* (2010); *Kairo* (2012); *The Novelist* (2013); and many more smaller games, often free, flash or mobile productions.

playing with a game, the player is free to decide when they want to finish their activity.

On the one hand, the interpreted games do not include the condition of losing that expels the player from the game, in which the game would need to be replayed in order to advance. Moreover, the save mechanism of both games makes it impossible to replay certain moments[5]: you can only replay the whole chapter or game, but this is the player's choice, not the necessity. The real-time dimension, so important for the adventure, is not disturbed by the necessity of replaying any difficult moments, but is enriched by discovering the narrated events hidden in the world, where the impression of living in the tale is much stronger[6] than in more action-oriented games. Therefore, as the player's choices do not make them responsible for the continuation of the game, the discussed games might be considered as toys.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, there is always an ending condition that distinguishes them from toys or simulations. The game has a meaningful ending that determines the course of the game, but reaching it is not dependent on the player's choices. This is what makes them so similar to a Sartrean adventure.

I argue that in order to preserve this "way of happening", the freedom of the player must be suspended, which consequently changes the characteristics of the in-game world, and of the in-game consciousness. I think that these changes enable an interrelation of the poles of the Sartrean dichotomy of "live" and "tell". In Sartre's absurd world, objects interrupt people from acting free by creating resistance in a meaningless and indifferent way. In a game, the resistance is designed, which means it meaningfully shapes the actions of the player. Therefore, the situation of being an "exile in the midst of indifference" (Sartre 1978: 508, cf. Leino 2010, 130-132), is changed in a game.

To summarize, I argue that the two games are a designed way of happening that temporarily suspends the freedom of the player. I think that this way of happening is "the adventure", sharing some featues with "live", which is experienced as a stream of accidental impressions, and some with "tell", the closed way of happening of narrated events. I examine the meaningful game world in *Dear Esther*, and the game player in the *The Path*.

Dear Esther: Infection

The protagonist of *Dear Esther*, the nameless, is wanders through one of the deserted islands in the Hebrides archipelago. The player starts their adventure by surfacing from the sea: the

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[5] In *Dear Esther* (2012) the player can replay the chapter, but not the particular moment of the game. The most probably different parts of the monologue will be displayed in already visited places, then in a strict sense, it cannot be replayed. In *The Path* (2009), once you go into the grandmothers house, you are not able to play with the girl anymore, and the game does not allow you to keep multiple saves.

[6] The topic of experiencing time in games was explored by Jesper Juul (2004: 131).

opening of the game is the beginning of an adventure that becomes an exploration of the lonely island. From time to time, the player finds a random part of the monologue of the character, and the island is imbued with meaning. Not much is happening here, but every single event is meaningful and carefully designed. It seems that the authors of the game juxtaposed the exploration experience and the storyline, where the player listens to the reminiscences or delusions of the protagonist, and becomes acquainted with an intriguing story as separated from a great visual background. Contrarily, I think that the poles of "live" and "tell" connect here, and enable the player to experience an immersion in well-composed string of events of a Sartrean adventure.

As the narrator says in one of the monologues: "To explore here is to become passive, to internalise the journey and not to attempt to break the confines." (*Dear Esther* 2012) The game consists of four chapters, and every one shows a more clearly depicted internalisation of the protagonist's journey. The scenery becomes less realistic, showing metaphorically, the multidimensional character of the exploration. Despite the fact that events are influenced with the perspective of the end, as in Sartre's idea of the story (cf. 2007: 38), they are experienced in the chronological order of life, and in parallel, as unconnected memories, lacking any temporal order. The player expects some kind of ending of the journey, but this is an unknown ending that does not determine the understanding of the ongoing adventure, the overall meaning of the exploration. The ending is also unable to determine the choices of the player, because the only choices that can be made here are taken on a different level, and determine the direction of the exploration. Taking this into account, one could say that *Dear Esther* is not really a game, as you cannot fail: there are no winning conditions, just exploration. The only way to quit is to terminate or finish the game.

You could say that the island in *Dear Esther* is the map, rather than a territory, a signifier not the signified (cf. Saussure 2011, Aarseth 1997:4), because memories of the narrator are inscribed in the island, in the exploration of its space, which is the adventure area. In one of the opening monologues the narrator says, "I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island" (*Dear Esther* 2012). The island is the signifier that gradually becomes one with the narrator's body, who starts confusing body with the island.

The insistent topic of infection killing the protagonist can be interpreted literally or metaphorically: "The infection is not simply of the flesh" (*Dear Esther* 2012), it spreads through all the levels, connecting the exploration with the biography of the protagonist, and opening the adventure area. Three realities are interwoven here. The first one is the memory of the car accident, with motives of the city, road lamps, a drunk driver, and the corpse of Esther. It is "mental infection" caused by the accident that wrecks the protagonist's strength and leads him to suicide: "I have become an infected leg, whose tracking lines form a perfect map of the junctions of the M5" (*Dear Esther* 2012). The second reality is the monologue of the protagonist about the embodiment and illness, which connects memories with the present moment: kidney stones, the infection of the leg reaching his heart. The third "infected reality" is an exploration of the island, experiencing the lonely landscape controlled by the player: "I

am travelling through my own body, following the line of infection from the shattered femur towards the heart" (*Dear Esther* 2012). All the contaminated layers of the game are intervowen, and their internal complexity is discovered in the spatial exploration (cf. Jenkins 2004, Ryan 2001). The biography of the protagonist is inscribed into the island, but the player is able to experience it in real-time mode: the first-person perspective suggests that they are talking to themselves, not knowing what they are going to say next.. There is no clear and visible analogy between the exploration and the meaning of the encountered story, no causal relationship showing the aim of the player's actions, their orientation on result or the way they lead to the conclusion. The end is not visible yet, they can experience the life-like events in the space of the biographical story (cf. Leino 2010: 287): it is a surprising adventure, as its meaning is not created, but discovered by the player.

The Suspension of Freedom

 I think that the game world can be considered an *improved reality* on Sartre's absurd world, providing the player with a feeling of meaning. Making life meaningful through the use of narrative is different from making it meaningful in a game. The game is profoundly connected with action: it is not a matter of interpreting the game in separate categories of narration or action, as they are specifically connected in the game by, the spatial exploration which makes the elements of the story understandable, but not necessarily connected with the place or time that is actually explored. Moreover, the meaning of the adventure is not created by the explorer, but is inscribed into the world. Sartre describes this type of relationship between consciousness and the world as mediated by "human transcendence":

"As soon as I avail myself of the opening marked "Exit" and go out through it, I am not using it in the absolute freedom of my *personal* projects. I am not constituting a tool by means of *invention*; I do not surpass the pure materiality of the thing toward my possibles. But between the object and me there has already slipped in a human transcendence which guides my transcendence. The object is already *humanised*; it signifies "human control."" (Sartre 1978: 427).

The game world contains only this "human transcendence", it is always under "human control"/"humanised", as it does not have an underlying layer of meaningless objects. Therefore, for the same reasons, considering Sartrean paradoxes of freedom, the game environment can be interpreted as *limited reality*. If the constitutive feature of the world is absurd, and there is always happening more than we need, the meaningful world is not the world at all. As far as the ontic dimension of freedom is caused by the constant conflict between the consciousness and the world (cf. Sartre 1978: 508), and freedom is realised by making sense out of the world/creating meaning of the world, which does not happen in the game, here the freedom of the player is suspended.

What or who then becomes the player during the gameplay in the non-absurd world?[7] I will now examine *The Path* to explore the second dimension of freedom, where the game environment is governed by different rules to the world.

The Path: It's not my story

The Path begins with a choice for the player to pick one of six characters to start the journey. The game is based on the fairy tale character, Little Red Riding Hood, who needs to reach her grandmother's house. The goal is also announced at the beginning of the game: "Go to grandmother's house and STAY ON THE PATH" (*The Path*, 2009). These two short sentences set the only rule and goal of the game. The promise of the adventure emerges, revealing the end goal that gives meaning to the whole experience. Unfortunately, following the rule leads nowhere, as Little Red Riding Hood arrives safely at the grandmother's place, but then finds herself back in the room that she originally left. To begin non-trivial gameplay, the only rule needs to be broken, and the wolf must be encountered in the woods. The main goal of the adventure then, is finding the wolf rather than the grandmother's house.

Both examined games encourage the exploration of experience, accompanied with a mood of anticipation, searching for the moment when events "arrange themselves around you like a bouquet of flowers, without your taking the slightest trouble to do anything" (Sartre 2007: 148). Textual commentary is much less elaborate in *Dear Esther*, where the adventure is visible in a audiovisual/simulation layer. When interpreting *Dear Esther* I have focused on the meaning of the game world. In *The Path* I am concentrating on the perspective of the player, who is a guide and the observer of Little Red Riding Hood, especially on the relationship between the player and the avatar. The player's task is to accompany the girl, seen from the third-person perspective, traversing the forest without given directions. When the interactive object appears in sight, the player needs to navigate close to it. In this moment the player's agency ends, it is time to withdraw. Then, if the player does not make any move, the avatar takes action. The rule is: to interact do nothing. If the player makes a move with the mouse or presses any key, the action is interrupted. When the player lets Little Red Riding Hood act, she will take to her basket an item-mark of the adventure, which will appear in the grandmother's house as the element of its interior design. The control over the player character also temporarily takes the Girl in White, the ghost-like NPC encountered sometimes in the forest. She approaches Little Red Riding Hood, takes her by the hand and starts playing a game, then she guides her back to the path leading to the grandmother's house.

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[7] The notion of "incorporation" used by Gordon Calleja instead of immersion and presence at once is worth mentioning here. I suppose that this also can be considered as the modi of being in an adventure (Calleja 2007: 132-175).

At the moment the game taking place in the forest ends, Little Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf, the personification of fears different for each of the characters. It is not explicit what happens to her, but after the cutscene showing her with the wolf, the screen darkens. Little Red Riding Hood wakes up lying on the path in front of the grandmother's house.

The adventure here is not connected with the one character: to experience it to its full extent, the player need to guide all the Little Red Riding Hoods through the forest. The adventure is re-playable from different perspectives. Each of the characters has a different adventure, and for each of them, the forest contains different meanings. They all share the mood of horror: the winning of the game, and the unlocking of the secret rooms are connected with the harm of the character; and the better the player does, the worse nightmare she will encounter in the grandmother's house. Inside the house the perspective changes to the first-person, and surreal, dark images, different for each of the characters, suggests a traumatic ending of the story.

The game plays with the player: following the rules make it impossible to start the game, active interaction with the environment has no effect, and in crucial moments the free actor is the avatar rather than the player. The player is not "incorporated" into their avatar, the Little Red Riding Hood, but traverses the forest with her in search of an adventure. The game makes an impression of a double mediation: the player interacts with the avatar by guiding her to some place, and becomes interpassive (Žižek 2002, Žižek 2009) when the avatar interacts with the game-world and items that invoke memories. When the player is in the game next to the avatar, the seemingly obvious third-person perspective, turns out to be the first-person perspective.

The player then has limited agency, the game allows them to act to some extent. In the interpreted type of game, the player's agency is strongly limited and displaced onto the avatar: the player needs to depart from themselves to take part in the real-time experience, temporarily turning off the realisation of their own existential project. The player makes choices in the game, but they are valid only in this particular game, and lack existential responsibility. Therefore, the player does not experience their own adventure: the connection between the being-for-itself of the player with the being-in-itself of the avatar, creates the *player-in-the-game* (cf. Klevjer 2012: 17-38), which determines the perspective of perception and even enforces interpassivity. The adventure is not personalised because it will happen to every one playing the game, where the adventure is shared and designed; but in the dimension of experience,it is always personalised

Furthermore, according to the dialectics of Sartrean opposites, the *player-in-the-game* can be viewed in terms of *improved humanity*: the character is relieved from uncertainty, really experiencing the adventure, and using their freedom in a limited capacity by simply fulfilling the position prepared for the player inside the game, where they perform the prescribed role. Leino writes that games "enforce, by means of the gameplay condition, particular projects onto their players" (Leino 2010: 135).

Conclusion

Roquentin might achieve his adventure through computer games. Roquentin could have experienced the life-like events in the space of the biographical story: it would be a surprising adventure, as its meaning would not be created, but discovered by him.

The adventure shares some featues with "live", which is experienced as a stream of accidental impressions, and some with "tell", the closed way of happening of narrated events. The game has a meaningful ending that determines the course of the game, but reaching it is not dependent on the player's choices. Therefore, games can be considered as an aesthetically designed way of happening that temporarily suspends the freedom of the player.

The game world can be considered an *improved reality*, providing the player with a meaningful environment; or *limited reality*, suspending player's freedom of creating meaning of the world. Moreover, the connection of the object, the avatar with the player creates the *player-in-the-game*, which determines the perspective of perception and *limits* freedom of the player. The *player-in-the-game* can be viewed in terms of *improved humanity*: the character is relieved from uncertainty by fulfilling the position prepared for the player inside the game.

I think that "this way of happening", the adventure, is possible when the relationship between *humanity* and *reality* changes in the game situation. The experience of gaming, interpreted from a Sartrean perspective, would constitute a real-time adventure lived in a designed world that is not absurd; it is experienced by the *player-in-the-game*, who can make choices, and then experience the illusion of acting freely, but their freedom in its existential dimension is suspended, as they are choosing from the designed set of possibilities.

Games

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