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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/14794713.2020.1758457](https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2020.1758457)

Published: 01/01/2020

*Document Version*  
Peer-reviewed accepted author manuscript, also known as Final accepted manuscript or Post-print

*Published under the following license:*  
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*Please cite the original version:*  
Kouratoras, M. (2020). Existential dramaturgy and video games: a formalistic approach to Telltale's 'The Walking Dead' as Existentialist gameplay. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 16(3), 341-360.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2020.1758457>

**To cite this article:**

Michail Kouratoras (2020) Existential dramaturgy and video games: a formalistic approach to *Telltale's 'The Walking Dead'* as Existentialist gameplay, International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, DOI: [10.1080/14794713.2020.1758457](https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2020.1758457)

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## **Existential dramaturgy and video games: A formalistic approach to *Telltale's 'The Walking Dead'* as Existentialist gameplay.**

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**Keywords:** Sartre, interpretivistic/antipositivistic games, Existentialism & ethical gameplay, free choice, bad-faith, pauses, wicked games.

### **Abstract**

Existentialism has recently appeared as an analytical tool for a deeper or different understanding of video games as cultural artifacts (Leino, 2012; Möring, 2014; Kania, 2015; Miranda, 2016). The existing discourse points towards the requirement of a systematic approach to this matter, which in the present research is in the form of a gameplay-dramaturgy case study. Telltale's video game *The Walking Dead, Season 1*, presented itself as a potential game that appeared to include many Existentialist aspects. Therefore, it became the focus of this research. This is because the game's story unfolds based on (conditional) freedom of choice in a difficult situation with challenging and ultimately insoluble moral dilemmas. Hence, the objective of this case study was a bottom-up, formalistic approach to analyse the connection between the game and Existentialism. It concentrates on the critical dramatic elements of the narrative and the game mechanics, with an emphasis on their game design pattern. The results of the analysis exposed *The Walking Dead* as a characteristic example of what could be considered an Existential ergodic drama or an Existential, ethical gameplay.

This is because of the game's affinity with most of the major Existential concepts both in its narrative and ludic nature.

## **Introduction**

*The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2014) is an episodic graphic adventure in the form of a 3D horror survival video game. The main character Lee, who is the avatar controlled by the player, is trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic world, populated by zombies (the “walkers”). He is struggling for an ultimate escape from this deadly situation in cooperation with a team of other survivors, represented by a number of non-playable characters (NPCs). Clementine, a young girl NPC, who is eventually parented/protected by Lee, is included in this unfortunate and helpless group of people in the game. While the game is identified as part of the action adventure genre, the gameplay resembles a dialogue-based adventure, which navigates the story through an action-tree of choice making. Most of the choices that Lee is required to make in the game correspond to a number of ethically challenged and ethically unspecified actions. Subsequently, the game bears a primary resemblance to a speech-based drama and has possible philosophical and structural dramatic similarities with Existentialism and Existentialist drama.

The present article investigates this hypothesis comparatively with the core philosophical ideas and dramaturgic structures of Existentialism, as presented in key critical and fictional literature by Jean-Paul Sartre (and Albert Camus). This approach follows a systematic and formalistic analysis of the correlation between gameplay and a number of Existential ideas. These ideas serve as essential criteria for a possible pragmatic relationship between video games and Existentialism. In its first section, the article presents the relevant previous work and a critical review of existing methodologies. Subsequently, it organizes the discourse into correlated Existential subtopics as criteria through which the game is analyzed. As a result this analysis aims to serve as a key case study for a critical methodology to research the relationships between Existentialism, gaming, and performance arts.

## **Current Methodology and Critical Thoughts on Previous Discourse**

The present study of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2014) focuses on the Existential mode of the narrative and the gameplay. The discussion concerns both a narratological and a ludological approach to the synergistic function between the dramatic elements of the storyline and the game

mechanics. The narratological analysis examines the gameplay coercion that uses difficult, ethically dubious and free (unguided) choices of action for the player. It discusses the morally unaided struggle of choice making in the game's virtual environment as a familiar narrative conflict in Existential literature. It is a struggle that involves a sense of agony and the detachment from real life known moral systems of thought. It draws away from any instructive information or ruled guidance that may suggest properness of a choice within the game. Inside this framework, the discussion encompasses the Sartrean concepts of the morally and mentally uncomfortable, yet totally imposed and inescapable, duty of unprincipled but ethically charged free-will choice-making; for this, according to Sartre (1990), is the corner stone of the torturing free-will condition of human existence in a world without a true moral guiding canon. It is a hell-like and absurd condition, which is stressful, and generates anguish and aloneness. It imprisons individuals into a false role-adopting social disposition, accepting feigned, stereotypic, "bad- faith" roles, in complete contradiction to what their true human "essence" should entail. This causes "self-deception" (Sartre, 1990). The narratological analysis attempts to illustrate these main Sartrean characteristics in the thematics of *The Walking Dead*, examining the story development, its cases, conflicts and main characters.

The ludological analysis attempts to research the functional role of the game mechanics in the ergodic, as defined and used by Aarseth (1997), and also in the controversial establishment of the Existential game-drama. The mechanics of the game procedurally produce a pattern of play that consists of timed response events, interactive cut-scenes and quick time events, which determine the core and tempo of the gameplay poetics. They constitute the heart of the ergodic formation of the game and consolidate the storyline with its ludic characteristics. The catalytic influence of playful pauses in the gameplay formation also provides one answer to Miguel Sicart's (2010; 2013) related question, i.e. how a game can be designed in order to provide the necessary type of pauses in play in order to serve "wicked games" with "wicked problems". This is Sicart's perspective of "ethical gameplay", which is correspondingly in focus in a discussion about Existential gameplay and especially in the case of the specific game examined here. At this juncture, the bottom-up analytic approach of *The Walking Dead*, meets with an existing theoretical and practical question concerning the design of games with an ethical orientation.

To meet the objective of this research it is necessary to map the principal narrative and ludologic characteristics that may explicitly define *The Walking Dead* as a game with an Existentialist orientation. The final conclusions are not expected to be exclusive for this game. However,

Existentialism is not expected to apply to video gaming inclusively, as there are a plethora of genres and styles. Rather, it is argued that the provision of multiple or free choice-making, as well as the enablement of modes of agency and player's projections in video games, concerns the relation of the video games' ontology with the critical application of Phenomenology exclusively. This inevitably introduces the concept of *Dasein* and fires up the Phenomenological critique (Klevjer, 2012; Micallef, 2016; Möring, 2014; Leino, 2012; Vella, 2014). Therefore, a universal concept of an implied Existential nature in gaming, or to video gaming specifically, with a single gnomon of the Phenomenological elements in Existentialism, may lead to a biased generalization and into speculative top-down theoretical analysis. The freedom of choice, for example, may be one aspect that is necessary but is still not a sufficient condition that could support a statement of an overarching Existential nature in gaming. The dramatic elements of Existentialism and its principal philosophical ideas cannot be disregarded. They cannot be deciphered into a limited number of intermittent projections, which may possibly serve a likely oversimplified total analogy of the Existential concept of the human condition, and a similar condition in gameplay overall.

Accordingly, the notion of the *gameplay condition* (Leino, 2012; Möring, 2014), as Leino has compared to the Sartrean idea about the human condition, may apply only to a subset of games, gameplay modes or gaming genres, rather than to a totality of the gameplay concept. This is because not all games or genres can fulfill the requirements of Leino's definition of the idea of *existential ludology*. The "condition of the player" (Leino, 2012) is not a unified entity but rather multidimensional, multivariable, multi-incentive and a diverse experience for each player. It is not "characterized by duality of freedom and responsibility" in all types of play and it is not always "resisting the player's project of playing" (Leino, 2012). In several cases, the player's project is empowered by the invigoration of the player's effort in the game world, occasionally beyond what could be physically possible in real life. Additionally, in extreme rule-breaking gameplay with hacks and cheat codes, the player enjoys playing in a "god mode" with characters of infinite health, walking through walls and skipping levels. Furthermore, Sartre's Existential concept is broader and deeper in meaning than its Phenomenological merit, which the definition of the *gameplay condition* applies in a deductive and diminished way, excluding it from the functional wholeness of the Existential concept.

Not all games appear to approach Sartre's profounder perceptions on the unsolved amoral-moral inner bouts of a never-ending self-torturing conflict. This central Existential concept is a substantial

criterion for the investigation of the Existentialist complexity in a gameplay application. Free choice-making and moral dilemmas should be ethically uncertain as it is in the Sartrean concept (Sartre, 1990), not prescribed by a given moral or other system of values or goals (e.g. to freely make choices and to play different roles in the gameplay in order to achieve different points of view, different experiences, collect evidence, find clues and solve puzzles). Plain proposals of free actions and choices, open world surroundings or multiple character role-playing and the use of props, do not function *per se* in an Existentialist manner; although they can be individually perceived as anything according to the disposition of the player. Despite this, the connection to Existentialist ideas has been suggested by an existing case study analysis by Kania (2015), although without the sampling of real evidence for its match to Existentialism. This work attempts to promote a dominant Existential position according to the will of the researcher and regardless of the entity of the researched object. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, which is the game in focus in Kania (2015), is mainly an open world, puzzle solving and stealth (to avoid encounter with enemies) gameplay with provided solutions. In this game, free-choice making and multiple role-play aim the search for in-game clues and the use of paranormal activities towards solving the deaths of the Carter family. The discussion does not deliver robust evidence for the game's relation with the Sartrean ideas it entails. Precisely, it does not present any solid and objective evidence about the Existentialist functioning of "bad-faith" in the gameplay, that could positively support the writer's subjective interpretation of the gaming experience as being narrated. Instead, it is an auto-ethnography of an individual player.

Following this line of thought, not every single game with a dramatic theme or a humanistic crisis (with the use of voice-overs as inner voices, absurd environments, open world wanderings, and stressful or torturing tournaments) corresponds with the structure of an Existentialist ludus. Additionally, a game like *Tetris*, as an example of an abstract, purely logical and instructional gameplay, which is remote from any ethical problem, is apparently unrelated to Existentialism. It could be metaphorically associated with Sartrean (principally Phenomenological) concepts but it is not a type of freedom-and-responsibility game or a game that simultaneously resists the player. *Tetris* gameplay is based on the swiftness of the player's perception of the landing and fitting together of accelerating geometrical forms, encouraging a puzzle solving effort. However, metaphorical interpretations of gameplay are still possible, but exist in the grey area between pragmatics and semantics or between reason and an epistemological bias (materialism vs. subjectivism). For example, Murray's (1997) metaphorical interpretation of *Tetris* as a representation of the recurrent tasking of American office labour, indicates the role of games (including abstract games) as cultural

artifacts in the formation of symbolic meaning and has also prompted additional debates on the subject (Begy, 2013).

An Existential approach to game analysis, and a possible basis for Existential game design, necessitates a coherent combination of the Existential concepts and issues. Most importantly it should involve the vigorous humanistic insights, as provided by Existential philosophy, literature and drama, and follow a methodology that can conclude with pragmatic evidence and solid understanding. This view is essential to examine the relation between Existentialism and games. In order for a game to be possibly considered as Existentialism oriented, a sufficient presence of Existential qualities is necessary, following the Sartrean discourse. For example, free will in an unguided/unprincipled and uncertain moral system of play (not just any kind of free choice in a game), ethical agony and abandonment, absurdity and lack of a certain meaning or final cause, self- reflection on moral, social, political and primarily self-defined issues, qualitative, uncountable, antipositivistic ethical gameplay etc. These concepts and dramatic conflicts are fundamental for the Existentialist concept according to Sartre's philosophical system. Therefore, rather than singly, they should be investigated sufficiently and in whole as a system in order for the researched subject to be considered as an Existentialist artifact.

Miranda's article (2016), is another study which connects video games with Existentialism, discussing the game *Life is Strange* as a form of philosophical, or Existential in this case, "simulator" (Miranda, 2016). However, to more fully link Existentialism with a video game a formalistic analysis is necessary following a similar approach to those that have been applied in film studies (Bordwell, 1985; Thomson, 1988; Braudy & Cohen, 2016). These involved studying the nature, the specificity and the means of the medium itself in order to explain how an artifact shapes its meaning (the form) rather than what it means (the interpretation). Miranda's (2016) article is based on a psychological approach to character analysis, which is mainly a linguistic or linguistic-metaphoric interpretation. Further clarification and specification of the exact ways in which the game mechanics and the story line work together in a video game to shape the Existentialist condition, or "simulation", in the gameplay, is essential. For example, how do the game mechanics and the gameplay attempt an imposition (rather phenomenologically) onto the player, trying to lead him/her into a performative Existential experience? To answer this, a close "reading" with the demonstration of a more detailed comparative analysis between Existential ideas and the cooperative functioning of game mechanics and storyline is needed. This method of study is presently suggested as an analytical formalistic

approach for *The Walking Dead*, focusing on the forms and functions, the syntactic and the poetics of the gameplay (as *new criticism* methodology would suggest).

Furthermore, it is essential to identify certain criteria for a methodological comparative approach of video games and Existentialism, which the present paper attempts to define by example. The definition of such criteria is based on a closer look at the Sartrean philosophical ideas and how they are applied in Existential drama and fictional literature. The interest is in how they are inscribed or transcribed into an electronic interactive gameplay form (not in the fantasy of one individual player). Therefore, previous theoretical discourse, specifically in the video game studies field, is also necessary for the development of this discussion and mainly concerns the phenomenological connection between the player and the avatar. Existing bibliography has already shed light on the phenomenological aspects of the player-avatar entity, which could be considered as cyborgian, or as "anthrobotics" (Miranda, 2016). The structure of the paper follows this approach. It organizes the headings and subtopics in a linear narrative of interrelated, fundamental Existential topics as criteria for the study of the Existential orientation of the game. It therefore studies the employment of the Existentialist human condition idea into the gameplay. This includes: the application of a (conditional and phenomenological) free choice making in a framework of unsolved moral dilemmas; the utilization of the bad-faith or self deception idea in a gameplay form; the state of absurdity and the self-reflection Existentialist functioning into the gameplay (via previous phenomenological game studies); and the functioning of the Sartrean social role-play of balance, the failed dreams of completion and the Existential negation and anguish concepts in a video game's interactive form. This analysis takes into account the relevant topics in game studies and the most notable Existential literature (by Sartre and Camus).

Therefore, the present paper discusses *The Walking Dead* as a version of Existentialist dramaturgy, contributing also to the existing discourse on interactive new media theatre and performance, in parallel with game studies. It does so in a systematic and formalist way and uses comparisons with the methodology of relevant previous work. It examines the functioning of a broad set of important interrelated Existential concepts in the game. The present discourse suggests this method of Existentialist dramaturgic/gameplay analysis in contrast to the generalised Existential "gaming condition" (Leino, 2012). This discourse is also arguing against the establishment of non-evidence based auto-ethnographic approaches as scientific analytical methods, as is demonstrated in Kania (2015). In addition, the current approach suggests the necessity to move beyond classical,

psychology-based character analysis for video games and interactive drama forms as in Miranda (2016). However, theatre and performance appear to be a very suitable and culturally rich source of information for this discussion on video games as performative (Existentialist in this case) artifacts. Therefore, attention is drawn to the Sartrean literature and drama as a pre-existing form of Existentialist "simulation", particularly in the analysis of the game's dramaturgic and poetic structure, its story and game mechanics. For Sartre and the Existentialists, theatre and arts' purpose is to replace philosophy and become the manner through which life should be explained and understood. Here we explore *The Walking Dead* as an Existential, interactive and participatory theatric experience in the digital era; a gameplay which exceeds its primary, main and conscious purpose as a game.

This analysis of *The Walking Dead* is under the lens of Existentialism because of the game's initial similarity with present Existential dramatic forms and its intense and difficult ethical dilemmas as the core of the gameplay. The ultimate focus is on the gameplay poetics and the establishment of a stressful pattern of play, with the employment of systematic pauses and imposed, unaided and unresolved ethical dilemmas for the player. Key questions that are examined are whether *The Walking Dead* has an Existentialist orientation? Are there aspects of Existentialism within the gameplay? How do the game rules and mechanics create the game's orientation? Can this game, and by extension any game, be considered truly Existentialist?

## **Analysis**

### *1. The Walking Dead* and ethical gameplay

Some of the dilemmas that Lee faces and that are systematically present in the game refer to whether he will lie or be honest, whom to save and whom to let be killed by the walkers, and what views or actions by his companions shall he support. Dilemmas of high dramatic tension include: the decision of whether or not to save a companion's life by cutting through his leg that gets caught in a hunting trap during the invasion of walkers (at the beginning of Episode 2); the problem of whether or not to execute his friend Kenny's little son who has been infected by the walkers (in Episode 3); the occasion of dismissing Lilly, one of the survivors, as a punishment for an accidental murder (in Episode 3); and the incident of executing a constantly aggressive and hostile NPC (Lilly's father Larry) at the end of *Episode 2*, because of his drastically evolving infection caused by the walkers.

Would this be a murder for revenge, a murder out of sympathy, terminating Larry's suffering, or a murder for protection of the group? Should the killing be carried out?

This type of gameplay can be defined as "ethical gameplay" according to Sicart (2010), for it is "... the experiential outcome of a player taking choices based on the moral evaluation of a given dilemma" and made up of "... ill-defined problems that require moral skills to be solved" in the form of gameplay challenges. Dilemmas in ethical experiences are often presented as situations with an irreversible outcome that depend on the player's decisions (Sicart 2010). They are similarly presented in the case of *The Walking Dead*. They provoke definitive choices to solve "wicked problems" based on moral rather than instrumental rationality. Instrumental gameplay accordingly is a type of gameplay that has a practical rationality that encourages rational behavior towards predefined, desirable goals (Sicart 2010; 2013). According to Sicart this is a moral type of play, although he also realizes that this choice-making orientation is not an exclusive type of ethical gameplay. Moreover, as discussed here, *The Walking Dead* moves ahead into a specific type of ethical gameplay that appears to be Existentialist and following the vein of Sartrean philosophical ideas and dramatic forms.

## 2. An interpretivistic/antipositivistic gameplay

The stressful Existentialist-drama nature of the game is based on its systematic ethical choice-making structure, which escapes a clear good-or-bad classification. It constantly leads into a state of risk and loss in the game, so it cannot be restricted into a rational less-pain, more-gain scale of causality. The instrumentality of the game decisions is therefore interrupted, disorientating the gameplay from a usual positivistic evaluation of the relation between choice of action and outcome. Furthermore, an ethical origin or reasoning, which would conceivably explain or justify a choice, can neither be easily adopted nor universally accepted in the game world (noting the differentiated, caused reaction of NPCs) or in its criticism. This system of a non-instrumental (interpretivistic, antipositivistic, uncountable, abstracted), morally unguided and dilemma generating ethical gameplay in a stressful, risky and dystopian situation, approaches Sartre's (1990) definition of the human condition.

## 3. The human condition

The Existentialist human condition describes a state of being continuously exposed to free, unaided and lonely choices as the eternal condemnation of forming one's own self and moral values according to one's own will. Human existence precedes essence for Sartre (1990), and subsequently humans form their essence by their freely chosen actions. This is an uneasy task, as humans do not control the consequences of their actions, although they are fully responsible for them. Sartre explains that the choice making is free and unguided in principle, despite the existence of moral systems of thought which may be projected as a supervising power for the ethical choices made. Nevertheless, they are still a product of choice and therefore Sartre rejects any "deterministic excuses" (Sartre 1990). He suggests that people are responsible for their decisions and they have to accept their responsibility in full. The human condition is illustrated as a lonely and unguided struggle for the moral formation of the self and of society, without control, but with the complete experience of agony and torture from conflicts and consequences.

#### 4. Free (open/unguided) game-essence

In *The Walking Dead*, Lee is a game character who is involved in an ethically unruléd play system of stressful and morally charged decisions with unavoidably catastrophic and irreparable results. His choices characterize the ethical entity of the gameplay, as this is the actual meaning of the game itself. Because of the interpretivism/antipositivism with the deficiency of success from the choice-making effort, Lee's "game- essence", by means of a reductive of the Sartrean human essence idea on the game world, is shaped openly by the moral choice making. Comparably to the self- determined identification of the human essence, Lee's essence as a gaming avatar, his game-essence, is being configured freely in an *in situ – in vitro* manner, according to the orientation of his ethical choices. It is not a quantified or predefined entity by an instrumentally oriented and quantitative system of gameplay.

Dissimilarly to *The Walking Dead* as an ethical gameplay configuration, the common concept in gaming is more instrumentally oriented in most game genres. Games as systems simulate processes very efficiently and because of their reward structures allow players to engage in predetermined behaviours in search of goals by teaching them their systems' operation and their use (Sicart, 2010). In this way, games are fostering practical instrumental rationality and encouraging players to reach predefined, desirable goals, even though play is not always a fully instrumental rational behavior, like it is in social environments (congruently with *The Walking Dead*). There, humans can play in non-

instrumental ways (Sicart, 2010; Smith, 2007). In computer games dilemmas are often tailored to illustrate different, predefined moral paths that a player can follow. However, ethical gameplay is incompatible with instrumental rationality (Sicart, 2010; 2013). Instrumental play focuses on the optimization and quantification of the results of the gameplay according to the challenges and their goals. This certainly requires the adoption of strategic thinking (Sicart, 2010; 2013). This is not the case with *The Walking Dead* because the moral dilemmas provided by the game do not point to predefined moral paths and actually avoid the synergy of strategy and causality.

## 5. Self-deception or bad-faith

The idea of a freely shaped and thus unprejudiced game-essence in contrast with a predefined, instrumental and calculated gameplay avatar, resembles Sartre's (2007) thoughts on self-deception or bad-faith. This is a condition in which human essence is being dominated by one's social categorization, i.e. by his/her profession, race, economic class, political ideology etc. In this case people have a false consciousness and belief that their social role is equivalent to their existence. They become self-defined by this misconception, which is bad-faith about themselves, and prevents them from realizing that they are fundamentally humans, not a waiter, a bourgeois, a worker, a cleaner, a scientist, Chinese, or American. These are only social identity projections on human essence, which convert people into social automata that function and perform accordingly, trying to fulfill their predetermined character's role and destiny. In this manner humans do not become what they would freely choose to be, according to Sartre (2007), remaining self-deceived role-playing automata. This notion about a gaming automaton outlines the gameplay behavior of an avatar in a quantified, strategic and goal oriented role-playing manner.

Therefore, every avatar in predefined and instrumental game play, could be defined as participating in bad-faith role-play. However, this condition cannot apply separately from a game's antagonistic Existential concepts (e.g. some interpretivistic, non-instrumental and ethically stressful but undefined gameplay endeavor, as discussed). Neither can it apply isolated from Existentialism as a whole theoretical and critical system of thought. This is because games as artifacts are only limited and conditional representations of real life concepts and not genuine free and open role-playing social spaces. Therefore they are always predefined units (discussed in a later section). A theoretical application or interpretation of isolated Existential ideas on games is conceivably unfounded and more likely unproductive. As an example, in Kania (2015) the lack of broader factual evidence of

Existentialist concepts and Existentialist dramatic functions/conflicts in the (notably puzzle solving) gameplay is filled with abstracted philosophical commentary of the author's personal and rather ungrounded gaming impressions, in a speculative theoretical fashion.

Continuing the discussion on *The Walking Dead*, Lee's narrative characteristics in the story also communicate interesting indicators for Existential semiotic analysis, concerning the foundation and the abolition of bad-faith in the game's narrative. In the introductory non-playable scenes of the game, Lee, a middle-aged Afro-American is pronounced with a predefined nature, a criminal, presented tied and locked at the back seat of a police patrol car. The discussion with the policeman who drives the car renders a set of predefined identities for Lee as a murderer, a teacher and a husband. After a car crash, Lee is released from his restraints and from the dominating discourse of social order and representative authority (the policeman), which previously established Lee's predefined identification. Lee's known identity has no essential connection with the development of the story and of the gameplay. Instead, it consists of roles that Lee plays that are the result of his anguish and the demanding dilemmas imposed on him as an ethically unguided free-will manifestation of a human being in a difficult and absurd game world. After the car crash, all pre-existing roles are abandoned and life within the game restarts with Lee's new open game-essence.

## 6. Absurdity and self-reflection

The in-game condition is complicated and inexplicable within unsolved social and psychological conflicts. The absurdity of the situation describes the uselessness of the in-game life and human state of existence. It approaches the Existentialist perspective, indicating the unavoidable Existential need for the self-creation of one's own meanings and values through individual choice making. A human, as an Existential being, appears to be an absurd figure and an ethically indeterminate and unrestricted individual, without a definite base or a certain cause. On this basis, Lee is an absurd being, similar to Mersault, the main character in Camus' *The Stranger* (Camus, 2004). He experiences situations which make no sense, but from which he cannot escape. He can only try to understand. Existential novels and theatre are based on discussions, monologues and externalized thoughts attempting to activate the reader's and audiences' empathy, understanding, and psychological involvement. Characters are presented as actors and the audience of their own actions in the story, which they carry out without understanding their meanings or consequences. They narrate their stories and they reflect on their complex causation via an esoteric dialogue in which they are not themselves who act but strangers

who they observe. This mode of self-reflection within absurd life conditions is a common characteristic of Existential drama and literature. It is widely demonstrated in both Camus' (1962; 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1995; 2004; 2007) and Sartre's work (Sartre 1969; 1975; 1989).

## 7. Self-reflection and the Phenomenology of the Avatar

In *The Walking Dead* a preliminary analysis of the self-reflected experience of the gameplay could follow the Phenomenological approaches to the avatar procedures as is used in existing video gaming studies. Klevjer (2012) comments on Wilhelmsson's *Game Ego* function within a game environment, which is an extension of the player's own sensory motor system via a tactile, motorised kinaesthetic link. It establishes the experience of the player's locomotion within the game's environment as a result of his control and it manifests the player's presence in the game, allowing him to perform actions. This establishes the *prosthetic agency* (Klevjer 2012), a prosthesis of the player's physical body in the game which becomes his second nature as a *prosthetic avatar*. The *prosthetic avatar* is a mediated agency within the game environment in extension to the physical body; in the sense of an extension of the player's own being. Rehak (2003) states that avatarial operations flow from two interdependent elements, the partially or in-whole visible foregrounding on-screen body and the assumed off-screen body that is constituted through the gaze of a mobile, player-controlled camera (Klevjer 2012). Different articulation between camera-body and avatar-body lead to different modes of play and subject effects, producing a sense of *diegetic embodiment* (Klevjer 2012). This *avatarial apparatus* mediates between the actual player's embodiment and his re-located presence in the game.

Following Sudnow and Merleau-Ponty's ideas about bodily extension and intentionality of spatial perception, Klevjer (2012) states that the system of gamepad and screen is not simply an extension of the body in its dual nature (i.e. the two sides of the *avatarial apparatus*) but something that approaches the extension of pure subjectivity; a kind of bodily self-awareness without external space. So, when we play, because the body is extended through the avatar, the screen space becomes a world that we are subjected to and a place we inhabit, struggling for survival (Klevjer 2012). The *prosthetic avatar* reconfigures our *body's ecology*, using Gibson's (1986) terminology, and alters our bodily space, extending it into screen space across the material divide in a new field of perceptual ecology (Klevjer 2012). The avatar is therefore no mere extension but a *prosthetic proxy* which stands-in for, or replaces, our objective body. This *prosthetic telepresence* is not then a mental projection, but an actual presence (Klevjer, 2012).

Relatively, Vella's work on the player-figure relation, distinguishes the double consciousness between the *ludic subject* and the *objective mode* (Vella, 2014). The *ludic subject* is the subject position for the player to inhabit in the game world, to determine their perspectives and their relation with it. The player in the subjective position becomes the figure, seeing the game world from the figure's subjective perception. The *objective mode* refers to the perceptual position outside of the game figure, perceiving it objectively from a distinct point of view. In the *objective mode*, the player is playing with the figure, observing it and sustaining the awareness of himself as a player, engaging with the figure as an object. Following the ideas of the phenomenologist Da Zahavi, Vella (2014) identifies the idea of the self as an experiential dimension in the *ludic subject* mode, which is grounded in phenomenological experience by means of the first-person perspective in gameplay. He also outlines the *objective mode* as the self in a narrative construction towards an experience under a coherent identity, for example in third-person perspective gameplay.

The phenomenological criticism of the avatar apparatus indicates a technological deductive of the acting-while-perceiving narrative scheme in Existential literature. Furthermore, a gameplay's narrative is a set of symbolic actions or acts of signification, as discussed by Burke & Klevjer (Burke, 1973; Klevjer, 2002). Burke states that all game events have a rhetorical meaning and the actions of a player in the game have a meaning within a pre-configured fictional world. This makes them a symbolic action of someone else (the avatar or the fictional game-character). Hence, the player's actions speak to him in a voice that is not his own, but rather the avatar's voice that he controls. However, the player-avatar apparatus in Klevjer's *prosthetic proxy* and the duality of Vella's player-figure relation indicate a greater complexity between the player and his avatar's actions in the game world. In this manner, a game event has a double function, being both configurative and representational (Klevjer, 2002). It operates both on a material level (in the world & in-game) and on a semantic level in the player's perception (Aarseth, 1997). Therefore, it is both experiential and interpretative. It is also intimate, as a self-experience, and foreign, as an image of another person (the game character). This way the player performs as themselves in the game world, although they perceive their own actions as the symbolic acts of someone else. The player exists as a stranger in his or her own virtual shoes. They are not simply themselves, but rather themselves while playing a role. This can be the role of the game's character or an enacted role by themselves, depending on the disposition of the player. In both cases, it is their own role-play that they perceive, mostly from a third point of

view in *The Walking Dead*, co-existing in and out of their virtual proxy body (the avatar). Such a situation resembles the self-reflection narrative in Existential literature and drama.

#### 8. The Existential, social role-play of balance

On the concept of bad-faith, Sartre (2007) recognizes that social behaviour is an automation; a game one plays. In order to escape this, he suggests that humans must realize the distinct separation between their self-deceptive roles and their real essence. Self-reflection on the true absurdity of life and on the social roles performed, are therefore a way to realize the pretentiousness of life. The separation between feigned roles and human essence is also a form of nothingness, an empty space (Sartre 2007) that a person experiences as an entry state in the free formation of his/her essence. It is a space in time (a phenomenological space) where the human subject freely enacts his/her real and truly meaningful values, accepting the full responsibility for their results. It is a space of self-determination escaping social determinism; an empty space of personal intentionality, flow of values, decentralisation of previous roles and determination of a person's true central priorities. It is this internal negation, for Sartre (2007) the existential gap, which separates the pure existence, or the human essence, from any projected identity. The esoteric/psychological abandonment of the predefined roles is stressful and gives a feeling of emptiness, a void, though it is necessary for Sartre's cause. Humans then become players who play their lives on this basis. In order to cancel the bad-faith condition, humans must maintain a balance between their essence, their social role and the in-between step of nothingness (Sartre, 2007). This is the Existentialist type of game that Sartre suggests. Achieving this shift is difficult because as Sartre also admits, we are tied to this conditioned and physical world, in which some form of action is always required. Escaping the bad-faith anticipated condition is therefore reliant on playing the social roles game that Sartre proposes, critically and continuously, although the game must be adapted to a purer spontaneity of nothingness. Humans as players should remain instantaneously free to step out from a given role or attitude; to abandon it and move towards new paths (Sartre, 2007).

In game design terms this is about a social, ethical game play that exceeds the context of instrumentality, in the direction of abstraction (of the assumed roles) and interpretivism, as it has been discussed. In *The Walking Dead*, this Existential conflict is between: (a) Lee's original inner will or essence, which he needs to identify through unguided choice-making in extremely doubtful and forceful moral dilemmas; (b) Lee's predefined social role in the game, as it is established by his social

identification, his relations with others (their ideas, attitudes and needs), as well as the imposed situations and the game's challenges; and (c) the state of nothingness: the agony and the despair, when helplessly, without any guidance or aid, Lee exists between those two conditions. Taking into account the avatar apparatus complexity, as previously discussed, this seemingly Existential type of game tends also to be the case for the player, through Lee as his prosthetic proxy. A push towards nothingness or the state of nothingness within the gameplay is practically a state of abandonment of the player in the gameplay. This is something that the game mechanics promote by increasing the anguish and the suspense, and by isolating the player within an unassisted decision-making process.

#### 9. Abandonment: Pauses embedded in the gameplay pattern

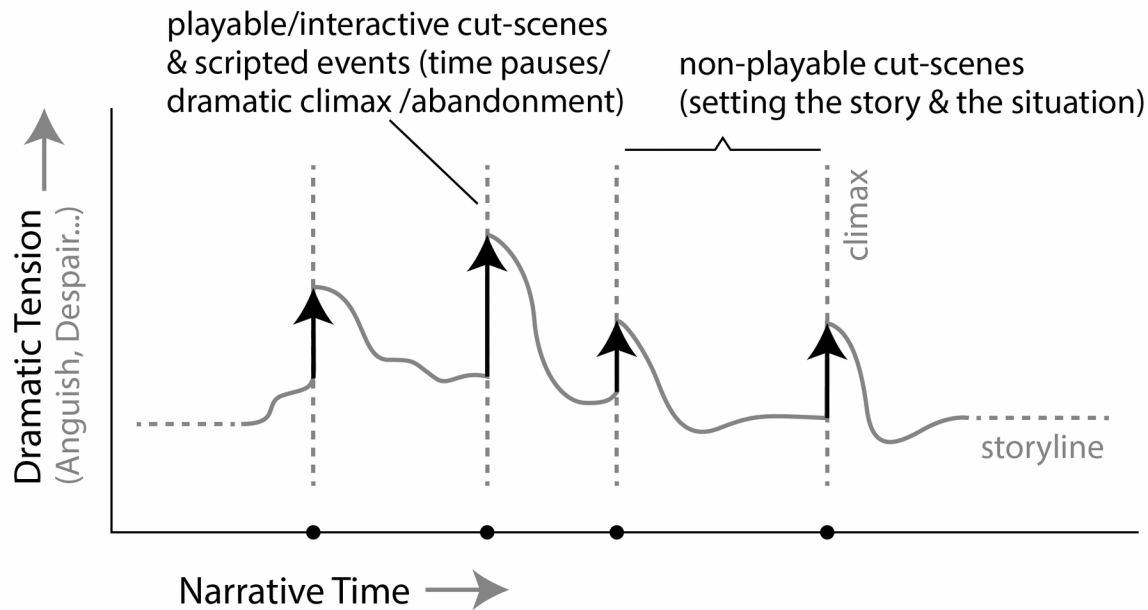
A ludological analysis of the game makes use of Lankoski's (2011) *Theory of Lenses*, which involves the application of theories in conjunction with game design pattern analysis, as introduced by Björk & Holopainen (2005) for the description of gameplay aspects (Lankoski, 2011). In the case of *The Walking Dead*, the Existential orientation of the game and the social role-play of balance are materialized by a pattern of frequent alternations between playable and non-playable scenes. The playable, or interactive, events usually ask for decision-making. The cinematic and the non-playable cut-scenes move the narrative and the story forward. They set situations which are uncontrollable and difficult for the player, and which eventually require a choice. Although interactivity is what players pursue in gaming (Crawford 2003; Rouse III, 2004), cut-scenes and especially interactive cut-scenes in *The Walking Dead* contribute a significant amount to the dramatic development of this nature of gameplay. As Rune Klevjer (2002) writes, cut-scenes are typically found in story-based action games and they establish a system of progression, offering a narrative and a unifying logic to them. This makes a game more believable and interesting. They do not remove or reduce the gameplay but they are an integral part of its configurative experience, affecting its rhythm without pausing it. Cut scenes, for Klevjer (2002), can be moments of release from intense action.

The animated cut-scenes in *The Walking Dead* function similarly. However, the interactive cut-scenes, which usually require decision-making, work in the opposite direction. They serve as pauses, again without interrupting the game, because at the same time they set the climax of the gameplay tension and the dramatic intention. There are also some playable cut-scenes that put the player into action, without demanding a choice (e.g., killing zombies). These scenes are not as common as the decision-making scenes in the game. In all cases, cut-scenes (playable and non-playable) create a characteristic

rhythm, in which the regular interruption or release is always expected. As Klevjer notes (2002), the player quickly learns this gameplay pattern, being rapidly and constantly thrown in and out of ergodic effort. Usually a (non-playable) cut-scene provides helpful and crucial visual information and builds up suspense by creating a situation, only to drop the player directly into fast and demanding action gameplay (Klevjer, 2002). According to Klevjer (2002), the use of cut-scenes creates representation and action, reading/interpretation and configuration, communication and event, and mediation and play all at the same time.

Specifically, in the case of *The Walking Dead*, the non-playable scenes establish the conditioned virtual world situation, with which the player gets involved through his avatar. The interactive scenes that follow serve an Existential (as postulated here) drama-game and its climax, while also setting the obligation for a necessary choice of action, attempting to bind the player to the ethical challenge. Through these decisions, Lee seeks a balance between his inner values as projected in the story and the needs of the current in-game situation in a state of nothingness that also pushes the player towards this state. At this moment, the player is abandoned, unassisted and unguided by the game in the form of any narrative or gameplay rules, guidance or determinism, in order to make a choice. The playable, choice-making scenes freeze the game to increase the sense of agony and to give the player some time to think about this choice. However, these timed-out moments of thought and neglect are actually the centre of the gameplay. Their intent is to immerse the player deeper into the situation, increasing the agony of the dilemmas that have arisen and compelling a decision in the absence of guidance (Figure 1). A right choice usually does not exist as an answer to the dilemmas and therefore thinking about choices after they have been made can often be stressful or even regretful. The game and the suspense mainly occur in these moments of abandonment, as there is no predefined role to play. The heart of the ergodic drama is in the playable choice-making cut scenes, in the paused moments beyond the actuality of narrative time and towards the game's Existential nothingness. Every previous scene is a background story and the next scene is the consequence. The game is mainly played in its apparent narrative "time outs", although these moments would be meaningless outside the pattern or the system of alternation between playable and non-playable scenes. This is the game's system of progression, using Klevjer's term, in which the player exists as a catalyst between cause and effect or in-between the animated cut-scenes (Klevjer, 2002). It is also the way in which the Existential game of balance is being established in *The Walking Dead*. The non-playable scenes set a strong connection with the difficult situation in the game world, which demands action. The playable scenes ask the player for a balance between what could be

realistically done in such a situation and what Lee or the player would really desire. Their cooperative product is anguish.



**Figure 1.** The gameplay poetics in *The Walking Dead*: An approximated conceptual diagram of the alternating pattern between the playable (choice-making) and the non-playable game scenes, which construct the ergodic drama. Crucial for the story, interactive cut-scenes freeze the narrative time to achieve the player's abandonment and the *Existential* negation, agony and despair, by requiring a difficult and unavoidable choice making, in a short and limited period of time (i.e. timed response, interactive cut-scenes)

The game design pattern in *The Walking Dead* provides one answer to Sicart's (2010; 2013) question about how pauses could be used in order to serve wicked (as defined by Sicart) problems for wicked games and ethical game design. Sicart realizes the significant role pauses play in this type of gaming. Ethical game play is a pause, he writes, a caesura, a hesitation in the act of play (Sicart, 2010; 2013). It is a moment when the player stops using social or strategic thinking to engage with the game. The pause is forcing the player to apply some other type of wisdom, an applied ethical thinking, a *ludic phronesis* (Sicart, 2010; 2013), drawing on the Aristotelean concept of *Phronesis*. Sicart defines *ludic phronesis* as the practical wisdom that instructs decision-making based on moral arguments and involving Virtue Ethics (rather than Deontology or Consequentialism). *Ludic Phronesis* requires the player to be morally invested in the decision taken and with a clear and deep reflection about what the choices are and what they mean (Sicart, 2010). It does not affect only the moment of choice making,

Sicart notes, but the whole sequence and meaning of play after the choice is made. As a result, this breaks the loop of an instrumental gameplay by forcing the player to pause and think ethically. Sicart (2010; 2013) wonders how these pauses, these hesitations in play, could be designed for an interesting ethical gameplay, as they unavoidably withdraw immersion by disrupting the gameplay. At this point, Sicart underlines the generally oppositional modes between immersion (deep engagement in instrumental gameplay) and critical reflection (game pause – *ludic phronesis*).

*The Walking Dead* contributes one practical answer to this justified concern by managing to embody the pause, the *ludic phronesis* moment, inside the ludus, making it an inseparable part of the gameplay. *Ludic phronesis* becomes, in fact, playable within a very restrictive time-limit rule for the decision-making process. This occurrence locates *ludic phronesis* centrally in the ludus of the game, in an agonising race against both the unmanageable existing dilemma and the shortness of time. Practically this means that the pauses in *The Walking Dead* are time limited (timed response interactive cut-scenes). Moreover, they function in an additional Sartrean manner, which indicates that avoiding a decision is still a choice (Sartre, 1990). It emphasizes that humans are indeed condemned to make choices. Subsequently, if Lee avoids or delays making a decision, then the game proceeds accordingly as if a decision of non-participation has been made (e.g. failing or neglecting to choose which of the companions will be saved from the walkers, with all the trapped ones eventually murdered as the time limit expires).

#### 10. The others and the “failed dreams of completion”

Unavoidably, the entirety of individual decisions in life influences the formation of the collective moral value system in society, independently from the individual’s will. For Sartre this is an additional way that anxiety and despair are generated. When one’s expectations are not fulfilled this leads to negation and a sense of nothingness (Sartre, 2007). In *The Walking Dead*’s interpretivistic system of gameplay, the team of survivors’ (NPCs’) reactions may often be unpredictable and not logically follow Lee’s previous actions and decisions. Lee’s expectations, as anticipated in the narrative, or the player’s expectations in the gameplay, are not always satisfied. Several times the NPCs react independently from Lee’s choices in friendly, trustable and supportive ways, or in a hostile, violent, and betraying way. The use of cut-scenes and quick time events serves this alignment when they interfere in the gameplay, subverting the narration and leading the story onto different paths from the ones projected. The Sartrean idea of the “failed dreams of completion”, as for example demonstrated in *The Wall*,

*Intimacy* (Sartre, 1969) and *Nausea* (Sartre, 1975), is present in the game through this failure of Lee's plans, actions and intentions. Humans are inevitably unable to bridge the void between purity and spontaneity or between their willingness and their socially constrained actions, leading them into "failed dreams of completion" and causing more anguish and despair (Sartre, 2007).

## 11. Hell is other NPCs

The in-game condition of Lee and his companions is tragic, enhancing the drama of the unceasing personal and interpersonal torturing caused by the conflicts of the individuals' unguided free choice. This state of affairs simulates an Existentialist theatric manner, which represents the tormenting of the human condition in situations as tragic as an inescapable hell. This case is vividly demonstrated in Sartre's theatric play *No Exit* (Sartre, 1989). In this play three sinful characters appear to be locked in a room, which represents the underworld. Over the course of the play, they realize that through their individual choices they become each other's torturer. Reflecting and questioning their previous in-life and their current in-the-room choices, desires and actions, they torture each other and themselves. Eventually, they state that "hell is other people" within this eternal condition of unguided individual free choice. The walkers principally mould Lee's game-hell situation. However, it is also enhanced by his own companions (all other NPCs), when their (preprogrammed) decisions and attitudes conflict with Lee's choices and expectations, causing an interpersonal mental torture.

It is not just the story, therefore, or the theme itself that sets an Existential framework of play. Classic Existentialist imagination, as it has been previously applied in the field of literature and theatre, has not been restricted to naturalism and realism. It appears to incorporate surreal, absurd, grotesque and terrifying elements in its narrative. A video game without a realistic and quotidian dramatic environment or even with nightmarish and intensive thriller and horror elements, as *The Walking Dead* has, does not necessarily divert from Existential matters, in contrast to what Miranda (2016) states commenting on the *Until Dawn* horror adventure video game and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. In fact it is very possible that Existential drama elements do exist in several video game genres and titles (some of which may also be mainly Existentialist games) beyond naturalistic social and visual settings and very different to the setting of *Life is Strange*, which is the main video game title focused on by Miranda (2016). The dramaturgic form and/or the game design pattern play a significant role. What Sartre actually proposes is a theatre of freedom, where people are enabled to break the power of destiny by their free will, according to Simone de Beauvoir (Gilbert, 2012; Miranda, 2016). Sartre

appears to claim this through his dramatic writing, in the way he emphasizes the moments of unguided ethical free choice-making as a climax of the Existentialist drama, i.e. the moments of nothingness, between what life, society or a dramatic narrative imposes in contrast to humans', dramatic heroes' and... gamers' or digital avatars' inner will. *No Exit* (Sartre, 1989) is such a theatrical example of Existentialist dramaturgy, which escapes the borders of realism in its narrative and dramatic setting. It makes use of passed away theatrical characters who play a very lively situation in a deathly place (hell), reanimated and undead. The nightmarish, horrifying, imaginary dramatic setting does not divert from the purely Existentialist orientation of the play. It rather serves a very clear, central and established (in Sartrean Existentialism terms) metaphoric meaning, i.e. social life and the human condition as hellish torture. This is the dramatic paradigm that *The Walking Dead* follows.

## 12. Conditionality of free choice making - Existentialism aestheticized

An additional focal issue that requires further clarification is the expected inconsistency in the request for free choice-making within a pre-designed artifact such as a video game. Video games offer some kind of free choice making to assist the expression of the audience's will and personality in the gameplay (Crawford, 2002). However, this is not an actual emergent narrative but rather an embedded one (Salen, Tekinbaş, & Zimmerman, 2003) that limits the number of available and predefined choices within the game. Existential unconstrained and untraced ethical challenges could not occur inside a predefined articulation, which necessarily incorporates the willingness and the values of its creator, no matter the lack of countable outcome and the anti-positivism of the gameplay. Undeniably, experiencing *The Walking Dead* more than once, in an after-play or meta-play mode, when a player desires to inspect the dynamics of different choices after already having played the game, reveals an existing predefined storyline. A storyline as a linear sequence of events (Crawford, 2012) can be expanded with branching, creating more than one path from one point. This function creates a story tree with a set of alternatives (Salen, Tekinbaş, & Zimmerman, 2003). Regardless of the pervasiveness of the story-tree and the action-tree choice-making process in *The Walking Dead* (at least in the first gaming experience), the story eventually progresses in a generally linear path, with a prescribed final end and without true branching narratives. In this case, the type of *replayability* as is defined by Codd (2015), is not *mechanical* (with different or unique play-throughs in a branching narrative), but rather *emotional* (with emotive hooks in the game to engage the gamer on a deeper level). Therefore, a gamer's interest to play a game of *emotional replayability* more than once is sooner focused around

emotional factors (Codd, 2015). There is always the same “fate” in *The Walking Dead*, which is simply reached from different routes or story paths according to the player’s choices. Apparently, either (a) the freedom of choice-making does not truly apply, except only as a feigned perception of the first gameplay, so the game has no factual freedom of choice; or (b) the game justifies the representation of an Existential drama as an aestheticized, although not authentic but rather conditional, free (unguided) choice-making of ethically unguided challenges for the player. The game may also satisfy the convention of the “failed dreams of completion” because it fails to always fulfil the player’s hopes and expectations and eventually comes up with an unhappy and unpreventable ending. As Tom Baines (2018) states, the only question in *The Walking Dead* is how one chooses to face its proposed reality. The only choice that really matters, in this illusion of choice, is the ultimate choice judged by the gamer’s conscience (Baines, 2018).

If a verdict for the game is on the course of action in real life, then the first sentence (a) is justified. However, *The Walking Dead* is undeniably an artifact, a video game that is discussed for its gameplay experience, its aesthetics and its semantics and also as a cultural symbolic product. Thus the second conclusion (b) comes into focus. In conjunction with *The Walking Dead*, the existing fictional writings by Sartre and others, aim at the artistic representation or aestheticization of the Existential concepts, ambiguities and conflicts. Existential drama, as a general term for the equivalent fictional body of work, aims to represent and aestheticize the philosophically and practically problematic human condition in its eternal and unassisted state of free will. This is precisely the necessarily philosophical role of art for the Existentialists, to represent and try to explain the absurdity of the human condition. Art products can be therefore only conditionally Existential in that sense. The key that unlocks the awareness for the drama experience in this case is the readers’ or the audiences’ suspension of disbelief. The Existential dimension of the narrative and the represented dilemmas and conflicts are practically confirmed by the avoidance of easy and simplistic *Manichaeism*: a state of an austere good-or-bad ethical dualism. This would alter the drama into a non-Existentialist, countable, positivistic, questions based, and puzzle solving routine. Rather, in the case of *The Walking Dead* gameplay, the conditionality of freedom and self-determination of choice making is established by the antipositivistic and non-instrumental nature of the gameplay. The suspension of disbelief of the player remains important. Furthermore, the subsequent rendering of the full responsibility and of the irreversibility of the decided actions; as much as the cause of the player’s isolation and anguish in the decision-making process, are also significant. The continuous ethical challenges urge the player to

work with the material of the story in the game, becoming a co-author of the narrative through their own performance and configurative acting (Aarseth, 1997).

## Conclusions

The main aim of this research was to examine *The Walking Dead* video game to see if it contains elements of Existentialism and to what extent it, or by example any gameplay, could be considered Existentialist in essence. *The Walking Dead* is used as a critical case study for the relation between Existentialism and Interactive Fiction video games. The research was organised in a comparative fashion between the structural elements of the gameplay and the principal concepts and conflicts of Sartrean philosophy and drama as criteria for such an endeavour. This type of analysis is suggested as a method of research for a pragmatic and grounded study for the relations between games and Existentialism. The analysis has allowed a number of conclusions to be reached regarding the validity or otherwise of this hypothesis and answer the questions posed in the Introduction. In line with the work by Sicart (2010; 2013), initial analysis revealed that *The Walking Dead* can be considered a type of “ethical gameplay” where definitive choices to solve “wicked problems” based on moral, rather than instrumental, thinking are forced on the game player. However, the game goes beyond this and actually introduces a system of non-instrumental, morally unguided and dilemma generating ethical gameplay in a stressful, risky and dystopian situation which could be interpreted as approaching Sartre’s (1990) definition of the human condition.

The game avatar, *Lee*, is positioned in an ethically unguided play system that unremittingly forces on the player morally difficult decisions which result in unavoidable, catastrophic and irreparable consequences. This can be considered as very similar to the depiction of the human condition by Satre (1990), whereby humans are fully responsible for their decisions and the consequences of these, and life is seen as a lonely and unguided struggle for the moral formation of the self and of society. This similarity is further supported by the fact that in the case of *The Walking Dead*, because the moral dilemmas provided by the game do not point to predefined moral paths, the synergy of strategy and causality which is present in instrumental game play is absent for the avatar and the game player with his “game essence” being configured freely according to the orientation of ethical choices.

Self-deception and playing a “bad-faith” role play, which Satre (2007) himself describes as how humans do not become what they would freely choose to be, is avoided in *The Walking Dead* through

the complete reset and abandonment of pre-existing roles in the game. This allows the avatar's game essence and identity to be built in large part upon the result of his anguish and the demanding dilemmas imposed on him as an ethically unguided free-will human being in a difficult and absurd game world. The absurdity of the situation describes the uselessness of the in-game life and human state of existence. It approaches the Existentialist perspective, indicating the unavoidable Existential need for the self-creation of one's own meanings and values through individual choice making.

Satre (2007) also points at a necessary state of nothingness, or existential gap that separates the pure existence, or the human essence, from any projected identity and something that a person experiences as an entry state in the free formation of his/her essence. In *The Walking Dead* the state of nothingness is practically a state of abandonment of the player in the gameplay. This is something that the game mechanics promote, by increasing the anguish and the suspense and by imposing the isolation of the player within an unassisted decision-making process. Satre also states that in order to cancel the bad-faith condition, humans must play the game of maintaining a balance between their essence, their social role and the in-between step of nothingness (Satre, 2007). The Existential orientation of the game is materialized by a pattern of frequent alternations between playable and non-playable scenes. This is also the way in which the Existential game of balance is established in *The Walking Dead*. The non-playable scenes set a strong connection with the difficult situation in the game world, which demands action. The playable scenes ask the player for a balance between what could be realistically done in such a situation and what Lee or the player would really desire, ethical dilemmas in other words. The gameplay poetics also function in an additional Sartrean manner. The requested responses are time limited, building tension but also allowing the player to not make a choice which has other consequences and supports the notion that avoiding a decision is still a choice (Satre, 1990).

The Sartrean idea of "failed dreams of completion" is also present in the game through the failure of the avatar's plans, actions and intentions. Lee is accompanied by other non-playable characters who react in unpredictable ways and the use of cut-scenes serves this alignment further when they interfere in the gameplay, subverting the narrative and leading the story onto different doomed paths from the ones projected. This kind of tragic situation could be considered to contain many similar elements to Existentialist drama, as for example demonstrated in Sartre's *The Wall*, *Intimacy* (Satre, 1969), *Nausea* (Satre, 1975), and *No Exit* (Satre, 1989).

Even though *The Walking Dead* is a video game with a predefined story line and outcome it has been shown here that it can be considered to be largely Existentialist in nature, at least in the first time of play. It can be thought of in the same way as Existential drama in that they both represent and aestheticize the philosophically and practically problematic human condition in its eternal and unassisted state of free will. As in any game, the ergodic is the defining discursive mode, not the narrative itself (Aarseth, 1997), forming in this case an ergodic version of Existential drama.

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