Poetically Man Dwells in Game Space:
A Phenomenological Investigation of Video Games as Art

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Abstract
The studies of digital games is a young scientific field notable for its interdisciplinary nature that seeks to unite several epistemological positions in order to properly encompass the wide array of questions raised by the subject matter. During the last two decades strides have been made towards the introduction of a unified game theory, with several of the more recently suggested methods coalescing towards a similar end. This paper posits a phenomenological game theory which circumvents the usual aesthetic arguments for a focus on game as space, and analyses what it means to be in that space. The result of the initial reading of mainly three well-known and critically acclaimed digital games strongly indicates that using Heideggerian phenomenological thought reveals things about games as art that a) reinforces the validity of commonly held beliefs in current game theory, and b) suggests new ways forward for game design to improve games through enhancing the player’s comportment into their spaces by means of phenomenological game theory.

Key words: Computer games, Digital Games, Game Theory, Heidegger, Ontology, Phenomenology, Video Games
Sammanfattning

Studiet av Digitala spel är ett relativt ungt forskningsfält kännetecknat av sin interdisciplinära natur som söker ena en mängd epistemologiska ståndpunkter för att förmå representera vidden av frågeställningar i ämnet. Under de senaste årtiondena har framsteg gjorts i arbetet med att utveckla och introducera en unifierad spelteori, vilket lett till att det idag kan skönjas en tendens gentemot samstämmighet i många av de föreslagna ramverken. Denna kandidatuppsats föreslår en fenomenologisk spelteori som kringgår de sedvanliga estetiska argumenten för att istället fokusera på spel som platser och vad det innebär att vistas i de platserna. De initiala resultaten från en läsning av tre välkända och kritikerrosade speltitlar indikerar att Heideggers fenomenologiska tanke avslöjar egenskaper hos digitala spel som: a) validerar vanligt förekommande idéer om spel i aktuell spelteori och; b) föreslår nya vägar framåt för speldesign att utveckla spel igenom att förstärka spelarens plats i spelvärlden via fenomenologisk spelteori.

Nyckelord: Dataspel, Digitala Spel, Heidegger, Fenomenologi, Ontologi, Spelteori, Videospel
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Introduction

Games Studies is a relatively young area of research that has yet to crystallize into a coherent science (Bateman 2015, Ralph and Monu 2015). The field is notable for its interdisciplinary complexities that arise natively from the multifaceted nature of games themselves (Tanenbaum 2015). There is a challenge in game academia to successfully balance the need for qualitative research into both “constructivist perspectives on knowledge creation” (Tanenbaum 2015 p. 59), and traditional humanities scholarship. However, while this is a challenge it is not a contradiction, nor an obstacle as such, but merely an indicator of the vastness of the subject matter itself, which encompasses several fields of study and by its very nature must be studied using several epistemological positions. One such contested viewpoint is the studies of games as art. Art history is itself a field associated with a wide range of analytical methods, encompassing postcolonialism; Marxism; feminism; formalism; connoisseurship; semiotics, and phenomenology, which is the focus of this paper. The field of art history holds that these methods are all useful and, arguably, important to properly and fully understand and comprehensively analyse art (Hatt & Klonk 2006). There is a breadth of material concerning the critique and hermeneutical discussion of digital games utilizing several of these methods (e.g. Bateman 2015, Cogburn and Silcox 2009, Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2011, Jenkins and Cassel 2011). However there has been less work towards applying the methodologies of art theory to analyse video games (Tanenbaum 2015), that is: to study the \textit{phenomena} of the games themselves rather than any determined aspect of them. Given that digital games can be considered art, and art cannot be analysed using any one method, it stands to reason that the same would hold true for games. As such, there is an argument to be made for bringing to bear the various methods of art analysis, and testing them against digital games in order to ascertain whether they can be appropriated to illuminate that art form in the same way that they do traditional art and visual media. While developing a more comprehensive arsenal of analytical methods for digital games is a common goal in the field of game studies today (e.g. Bateman, Hunicke et al 2004, Koster 2015, Ralph and Monu 2015), this field tends to focus on creating a general game theory that clarifies the fundamental components of games from a design perspective such as the MDA framework (Hunicke et al, 2004) or the Triadic Game Design Theory (Harteveeld 2011). A unified general theory is highly desirable, as it would serve to further establish games theory as a legitimate field of science (Ralph and Monu, 2015). However, since games are a complex amalgamation of interdisciplinary components, an analysis of games is always likely to be equally complex and the epistemological situation in
art theory is a clear indicator that games theory will need a methodological toolbox of, at least, equal diversity. One of the perceived limitations of all types of general game theories is that they differ somewhat on the very definition of what games are. Some, like the tetrad (Rouse and Ogden 2005, Schell 2008), includes narrative in the definition while others, like the MDA-framework (Hunicke et al 2004) settles on a general idea of evoked emotional response through aesthetics, and others still claim that narratives are superfluous to what is essentially systemic theory (Salen and Zimmermann 2004). As phenomenological theory does not concern itself with these types of definitions it has the potential to offer a useful perspective on the ontology of games while breaching the gap between all the aforementioned viewpoints, acting as a unifying lens through which to uncover what has hitherto been obscured. Attempting to formulate a theory of phenomenological game analysis can thus potentially produce conceptual advancements and further highlight synergies between art- and games theory. In recent years Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology has seen a resurgence with the rise of hermeneutics as an important part in modern AI-theory (Guignon 2006). Moreover, Heidegger posits that there is no external vantage point from which to view things in a presuppositionless angle, indeed the very thing that most attempts at a unified game theory is founded upon. His ontology requires one to begin by describing the phenomena, i.e. that which shows itself. Current games-as-art-theory echo this supposition with the definition of games as a paradigmatic example of art that “require its audience to adopt a general strategy of interaction before any focused emotional response to the content of the work is even a possibility” (Cogburn and Silcox 2009, p. 107). However, the notion is also very much present in the often used MDA-framework methodology (Hunicke et al. 2004) which defines games as artefacts that create behaviour through interaction and thus impossible to completely analyse without monitoring that which shows itself during play. Therefore the purpose of this bachelor’s thesis is to explore how Heideggerian phenomenology can be used as a complimentary method of game criticism and analysis. This will be done by viewing several digital games through a phenomenological lens and theorizing how the modern concept of virtual game worlds might fit into Heidegger’s notion of being. The nature of Heidegger’s phenomenology also makes possible an analysis apart from traditional aesthetic viewpoints in game theory, meaning that the traditional concept of games as aesthetic experiences (e.g. Hunicke et al. 2004, Schell 2008) may be circumvented, potentially allowing for an illuminating holistic view. As a piece of qualitative research, this paper will investigate multiple titles, using them as sources of data from which to build a claim (Creswell 2003). The phenomenological argument will be backed up using studies from the fields of game theory, narratology, philosophy and psychology.
**Current Game Theory**

There are several systemic frameworks that attempt to illuminate the inner workings of digital games. The MDA-framework (Hunicke et al. 2004) seeks to break down the perceived experience (represented by ‘system’, ‘rules’ and ‘fun’) of games into their ‘design counterparts’, designated as ‘Mechanics’, ‘Dynamics’ and ‘Aesthetics’. The theory posits that a game is an aesthetic experience which flows from the dynamics created by the rules governing the mechanics. MDA’s definition of games are that they are artefacts that build behaviour through interaction. The elemental tetrad (Schell 2008) is a somewhat similar framework which defines games as an amalgamation of ‘Technology’, ‘Mechanics’, ‘Aesthetics’ and ‘Story’. Schell considered story a fundamental component of games, however this is a contested view that is still being debated. In 2015 Ralph and Monu attempted to reconcile the Elemental Tetrad with the MDA-framework to create the basis for a more general unified games theory. Their theory makes allowances for the overlap between game mechanics and story mechanics while still differentiating them. It also includes three types of specific narratives lifted from Jenkins (2004): embedded narratives which are told by the game developers; emergent narratives which are told by the player, and the narratives that stem from the player’s interpretations of these narratives. The theory also claims to have clarified the meaning of aesthetics and dynamics.

Other notable analytical methods include Harteveld’s *Triadic Game Design Theory* (2011) which focuses on the examination of so-called serious games, which are games designed with an objective other than entertainment as their primary goal (Michael and Chen 2006). This method argues that all games inhabit three worlds: reality, which refers to the domain in which the game is situated; meaning, which relates to how a player interprets the game, and play which pertains to the experience of playing the game. These theories all concern themselves with the game as something thematic to be reflected upon, they deconstruct the game as a piece of technology and assign etiquettes to the various components. This is a valid endeavour, but in focusing on the games as artefacts the question of what it means to be in the games is arguably forgotten (Tanenbaum 2011). A phenomenological analysis does not purport to delegitimize any of these theories, but to serve as a complementary lens through which the games themselves may be seen and studied.

**2.1 Games and ‘Fun’ as Learning**

Raph Koster (2012) has defined games as “The act of solving statistically varied challenge situations presented by an opponent that may or may not be algorithmic within a framework that is a defined systemic model”. He has formulated the game atom theory which breaks down
games into composite mechanics, each ideally a smaller game in isolation. To Koster, the fun in games is defined as a learning experience (2013). The concept has been criticized for not taking into account the various other ways people enjoy games (Bateman 2015), but Koster does not explicitly say that players do not enjoy games for other reasons, he only makes the value judgement that fun which does not entail learning is inferior. The idea that it is the learning that drives the appeal of the gaming experience is echoed by James Paul Gee (2007), who talks of 36 learning principles present in digital games which are all indicative of good game design as well as important for efficient learning anywhere. Gee also talks about three types of situated identities in video games which he identifies as: real-world identity, i.e. the identity we bring with us into learning situations (learner as, for example, a scientist); the projective identity, i.e. the identity we take on when trying to act as something in learning situations (student as scientist), and the virtual identity which is the identity we take on when studying in order to understand what it is to be something (student as scientist). This self-interpretive practice is echoed in Heidegger’s hermeneutics, where we must always reinterpret ourselves depending on our needs and projects (Hoy 1996). For example, we must sometimes interpret ourselves as students, sometimes as teachers, consumers, gamers etc.

2.3 Games in Philosophy
Cogburn and Silcox present a variety of philosophical perspectives on digital games (2008). Although they briefly discuss Heidegger in terms of how we perceive objects in a game, and his role in existentialist philosophy, they never attempt a Heideggerian account of what it is to be in the game. Bateman also touches upon philosophical issues of game design (2015), conducting a “Wittgensteinian investigation into explicit game aesthetics” (p. 406). Here Bateman tangentially touches upon the lack in current game theory for a more inclusive view on the importance of imagination and fiction to games, and that digital games should not be treated as radically distinct from other forms of play. This thesis focuses on digital games but does not disagree with that notion. Bateman also notes that there is still a disproportionate valorization in game design of victory aesthetics, i.e. the idea of games as challenges and puzzles (2015, p.406). A phenomenological reading as we shall find does away with any such constraining definitions altogether and instead focuses on modes of being in games, and how the reliability of that immersion, i.e. the part of the game that is art, and its serviceability, i.e. the part of the game that is merely functioning (Mitchell 2010), is affected by various design choices. This paper agrees with Bateman that the most suitable definition of play is the one introduced by Cailliois (1958) and further developed by Malaby (2009), namely uncertainty.
Making uncertainty the frontier of implicit game design is the only way of ensuring that all possible definitions of game will be contained within the superset of aesthetic values for play (Bateman 2015, p. 407)

While there are many proposed definitions of game, few have the width and flexibility necessary to encompass the entirety of the game subject as new forms of games are introduced regularly, thereby stretching the notion of what games are and why we play. Uncertainty, or an openness to the unexpected, is also the main reason to why an art work “works” in phenomenology, as we will see (Heidegger 2013).

2.4 Psychoanalytical Interpretations
In film theory Freudian psychoanalytical perspectives have long been used for the analysis of visual pleasure in cinema (e.g Mulvey 2011; Creed 2011), and more recently the same methods have also found use in readings of digital games in video essays online, most notably those of Anita Sarkeesian. Central to the psychoanalytical perspective is the concept of scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking. Narcissistic scopophilia can be used for strengthening the viewer’s self-image by allowing them to recognize themselves in a character on screen and see themselves positively reflected. For example in playing a game like Mass Effect the player may see themselves reflected in the main character Commander Shepard and feel pleasure in being a righteous hero with the power and resolve to do the right thing. Voyeuristic scopophilia on the other hand, gives the viewer pleasure by taking a character and turning them into objects for the viewer to possess by looking. A good example would be the game Bayonetta (Platinum Games 2009) where the eponymous main character is designed to arouse male players by moving in an overtly sexual manner and dresses entirely in clothing geared toward satisfying various fetishes. This is one way of understanding how one can “be in” a game, by recognizing our better self, narcissistic scopophilia lets us connect with the character we play and see ourselves reflected positively on the screen. Psychoanalytical theory has some similarities with phenomenology and is used both as a tool for analysing conventional art and digital games, potentially making it a bridging theory between the two. The concept is also echoed in Gee’s identity principle discussed earlier, connecting it to semiotics which is strongly resonant with Heidegger’s thought.

2.5 Hermeneutics in Game Theory
Tanenbaum talks about the application of practices related to philosophical hermeneutics and close reading to the study of digital games. In his own words this approach deals with the “poetics” (2015, p.59) of digital games, which goes back to Heidegger’s definition of the word which is taken from the Greek root Poiesis, meaning the making of things (Heidegger 2013).
Tanenbaum seeks to articulate how digital games accomplish particular experiential outcomes and from that derive useful principles for understanding how games create their meanings. This is relevant to this study as a bridging work as it too foregoes the traditional game theory analytical method in favour of a hermeneutical one. Tanenbaum’s digital game hermeneutics differs from this paper’s Heideggerian analysis on a number of key points however. For one it understands games as experiences which is a posteriori of the concept of game as space that this paper suggests. The goal of Tanenbaum’s thesis is also partly rooted in aesthetics, which this thesis avoids by taking a purely Heideggerian route, circumventing aesthetics altogether. Lastly while the method’s for hermeneutical studies of digital games suggested by Tanenbaum works as a bridge between conventional games studies and phenomenology, he consciously takes a more calculated approach to his readings than the scholars from whom his concept of hermeneutical studies are derived. Furthermore he does not purport to use the thought of said scholars, only their methods. This study instead utilizes both the thought and hermeneutical method of Heidegger, converting them for use in game analysis.

**Heidegger’s Thought**

Heidegger redefined philosophy as hermeneutics, a radical claim that has had a decisive influence on twentieth century continental philosophy (Lafont 2007). Hermeneutics is redefined in *Being and Time* as a way of understanding human beings themselves, rather than the original meaning of an interpretive method for sacred and legal texts. Etymologically, Heidegger defines the human being as a self-interpreting animal, rather than a rationally thinking one.

Since Dasein’s understanding of being is by and large implicit, Heideggerian ontology does not consist of arguments in the traditional sense of drawing conclusions from explicit premises accepted as true. Rather, it consists in the circular process of using concrete examples of Dasein’s encounters of entities as the basis for explicit interpretations of its understanding of being, and then confirming or revising these ontological interpretations in the light of further concrete cases. (Boedeker JR 2007, p. 161)

Beings and entities are subject to ontological difference, beings being “…that which defines and determines entities as entities” (Heidegger 1953, p. 6), and entities being defined as all the things that we talk about, look at, or comport ourselves toward such as ‘what we are’, and ‘how we are’. Our being is defined by the fact that we are beings-in-a-world [Dasein], “This being [Seiende], which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being, we formulate terminologically as *Dasein*” (Heidegger 1953, p. 7). The nature of being can only be understood by means of human understanding (Frede 1996). There is to Heidegger a “formal” necessity involved in any world if activity and meaning (Okrent...
1996). Being and time belong together but are also subject to opposition, and we may approach this belonging together through argumentation. It is important to note here that Heidegger’s thought does not suppose getting us outside of this world, rather it only provides a different route into this one (Ibid.). When attempting to analyse digital games through Heideggerian phenomenology one must first consider how one would define such a thing in terms of his thinking. Heidegger’s phenomenology can be described as a way of:

…seeing that takes its departure from lived experience. It aims at grasping the phenomena of lived involvement in the world, before our understanding of the world becomes determined or altered in “thematic” or reflective thought (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2007, p. 9).

We usually try and understand a game from an analytical standpoint where we are outside the experience and reflecting upon the various aspects of it (e.g. Adams 2014, Rogers 2014, and Schell 2008). We attempt an objective view where the game may be dissected and broken down into parts and understood as a construction. Phenomenologically, we would instead try to grasp the experience a priori, before our understanding of the game’s design forces us into these patterns. Heidegger’s phenomenology is one of everydayness, where he posits that we disclose a familiar world where things makes sense to us through our proficiencies. “No matter how keenly we just look at the outward appearance of things constituted one way or the other we cannot discover handiness” (Heidegger 1953, p. 69); it is through our making use of things that they are undisguisedly encountered as useful equipment. For example, for a person without gaming know-how it is hard to grasp the use of a game console controller just by studying it, but the more one plays games on the console the more unveiledly the gamepad is encountered for what it is: a useful tool. Heidegger would say that we can encounter the gamepad as a present-at-hand or ready-at-hand object. Looking at the gamepad we may encounter it as a present-at-hand object made out of plastic and laden with colourful buttons. And at another time we may encounter it as a readiness-at-hand object useful for playing games with. To Heidegger being-in-the-world is a unitary phenomenon, the being of everyday functional contexts, such as playing games: “are inseparable from the specific uses we put them to in the course of our shared practical involvements in the world.” (Guignon 1996, p. 11). We are ourselves also identified by the equipmental contexts that make up our worldly dwellings, e.g. a gamer, or an e-sports professional are determined by the types of games they play, what equipment they prefer, their reasons for playing, and so on. When a person plays a game and everything is flowing smoothly, they experience the physical controller aspect of the game, e.g. a mouse and keyboard setup or a gamepad, as having withdrawn into its own usability. The surrounding world is unnoticed, and the player can see through the controller what she has set
out to accomplish in the game; the ready-to-handedness is authentic (Heidegger 1953). But when something happens in the game that interrupts the workflow, the computer running the game crashes or the game displays bugs, the player changes her perceptions, and the game shows up to her in a different way. The player now looks for a solution and things are temporarily “unready-to-hand”. She may see the functional relations between all the things that took part in her playing. If the problem persists however, the game crashes again, or will not start, or the bugs keep marring the experience, she will begin looking at everything as present-to-hand objects to be explicitly noticed. This mode of perception presents her with a contextless reality full of objects, one that has arisen derivatively from her project of playing the game. To Heidegger her playing the game would be considered more “primordial” than the contextless state that has followed (Guignon 1996). This is due to the phenomenological concept of the “clearing”, in which: “specific forms of human existence along with particular sorts of equipmental context emerge-into-presence in their reciprocal interdependence” (Guignon 1996, p. 12). On a fundamental level then, one may consider whether games are constructed by the game designers, or if they are constituted by the totality of their efforts, the players being in those games, and all the things ready-at-hand to allow them to interact with them (the reasoning finds further support in communication theories, e.g. Fiske 2011). This question allows us to consider games more as a temporal event of disclosedness in which the player appropriates the game into intelligibility.

3.1 Concealment
The concept of disclosedness is part of the idea of concealment and unconcealment, which is central to Heidegger’s thoughts on art and figures prominently in practically all of his work (Wrathall 2007). Unconcealment can be understood as ‘truth’, but as that word is charged with many preconceived notions Heidegger gradually came to reject that terminology entirely in favour of the former (Heidegger 1998). Unconcealment can be understood as a clearing [Lichtung], which is etymologically derived from the word meaning a clearing or glade in a forest. The clearing is not to be understood as any type of entity or physical presence, but as a space where our understanding of being opens up some possibilities and keeps other possibilities concealed. To make a game-related example we could take level design as an example. A well-designed level presents the player with possibilities for interesting choices and being in that level the player should ideally realize those possibilities. In the clearing the player can see these possibilities, but in order for her to construe them as possibilities with any weight the game must at the same time withhold other possibilities. The player cannot be allowed to
think that getting through a door is a possibility when it is not, and ideally she should not even consider the door at all. Only then will the clearing work: when it shows the player her possibilities; keeps away other possibilities, and keeps away the fact that it is keeping away other possibilities.

Our view of games depends on pre-linguistic dispositions toward certain properties that are subject to particular styles of being; “The unconcealment of beings is the anticipatory gathering which lays out certain properties and relationships as salient” (Wrathall 2007, p. 355) that is, some features stand out because we see them as more important. This is because our culture is always disposed to some particular feature. This makes us absorbed in our dealings with certain things which blinds us to the fact that their availability is a function of our understanding of being, “having lost sight of the concealment that makes it all possible we become convinced of the necessity and unique correctness of our way of inhabiting the world” (Wrathall 2007, p. 355). This also corresponds to theories on ideology in communication studies (Fiske 2011). In terms of game design one could say, for example, that the design trait of levelling up, i.e. to gather points through tasks within the game in order to reach a higher rung of practical ability, has been subject to concealment. In the beginning it was a way of simulating becoming better at a craft or skill through repetition, but with time the act of levelling up has arguably become a goal in and of itself. One levels up to level up. The game designers have become so accustomed to the truth that role playing in games requires a levelling up system that the idea of presenting the truth of getting better at something got lost along the way. So in this instance one Heideggerian criticism might be to consider the original question to which the answer was a levelling system, and attempt to disclose what that answer has been concealing since the 1970s. This thought finds support in Bateman (2015), who discusses how the game industry has been presupposing “the centrality of conflict and victory” since the dawn of digital gaming (p. 406). From the first fledgling arcade games the notion of conflict and victory aesthetics as being a priori have been firmly rooted as an irreconcilable truth of digital games. This notion has been challenged, and is still challenged today, but conflict and victory remain ubiquitous to the vast majority of digital games released (ESA 2016). From a Heideggerian standpoint the disclosedness of conflict and victory in generations of digital games have concealed the answer to the question of the nature of games.

3.2 Something that opens up a world

Heidegger claimed that there was in philosophy an inadequate sense of what it meant to be in a world. He exemplifies this by talking about Dasein in relation to everyday objects: “One
supposes that this title means: the human would be in the world as the chair is in the room and the water in the glass” (Heidegger 1996, p 14). Heidegger had four definitions of the term “world”: in the ontical sense meaning the objective world; in the ontological sense meaning the being of a particular realm of entities, like “the world of gamers” or “the world of university scholars”, i.e. worlds of the kind of being of which its entities all have in common; in the ontical but existensiell sense, meaning social or cultural worlds human beings can be said to live like “the world of revolutionary Russia” or “the world of modern Sweden”; and lastly “world as designating the ontologico-existential concept of worldliness in general (Heidegger 1953).

Humans are not in the world in the same way as a chair is in the room, because we as self-interpreting beings know something about what it means to be in the room. Heidegger states in an earlier example in Being and Time, from the expression “the chair is touching the wall”:

... In principle the chair can never touch the wall, even if the space between them amounted to nothing. The presupposition for this would be that the wall could be ‘encountered’ by the wall. (Heidegger 1953, p. 55)

A chair and a wall are not capable of touching each other, because they do not grasp the concept of touching. Likewise a game as a worldly object, e.g. a disc or a cartridge lodged within its box, cannot touch us. The game, however is not the media it is printed upon, just as a sculpture is not defined by the stone it is chiselled from, as works of art they are defined by their ability to manifest, articulate or reconfigure (Heidegger 2013). And here we gradually come to the conclusion that ontology is too limited to describe the worlds that games-as-art radiates. To Heidegger there are two ways of talking about ontology: the ontic, which concerns the properties of beings; and the ontological, which is the discussion of different ways and modes of being. A digital game, for example, is not just an object, the game is not the disc in the gaming console. Analyzing the disc ontically, as something occurrent, we would conclude that it is plastic and reflective on one side, it would tell us nothing about the game. However, discussing the ontology we would similarly not be able to say anything about the game. The game as ready-at-hand, that is available, could be discussed in terms of how it belongs to a context of equipment, like the game console, TV-set, or headphones, or a context of game fandom with retailers, conventions and cosplaying. But in a Heideggerian sense it is clear that a game is not just available or occurrent, as no matter how exhaustively one describes the ontic and ontological qualities of its being one may never touch upon what it means to encounter the game. The reason for this is that games are not intraworldly objects but art, and therein also lies the solution. Heidegger realized later in his career that the spatiality of Dasein was too narrowly defined to be able to grasp art, in his case it was the study of sculpture that brought on a revision
to his thinking (Mitchell 2010). It is in these later ideas that we find the latticework of a phenomenological game analysis. Humans as beings-in-the-world [Dasein] do not enter into the game as merely a workflow, but into a world that is streaming from the screen. In his essay *Poetry Language Thought* (2013) Heidegger concluded that art should be defined as something “which opens up a world” (p. 44), a work which belongs “uniquely within the world opened up by itself” (p. 41). We do not encounter games as neither presence-at-hand nor readiness-at-hand objects. Rather, they are a clearing where we emerge in the game world through reciprocal interdependence. The game-as-art, as this paper proposes, is space.

### 3.3 Heidegger on space

In his writings on sculpture Heidegger introduced the notion of limits as the point, not of an end, but as a means of introduction, which became central to his thoughts on art, and are indeed central to the thoughts put forth in this paper (Mitchell 2010). Put simply, in Heidegger’s view the limit of a thing marks its beginning, since it is where a thing ends that it becomes capable of interacting with the rest of the world (Ibid.). For example, we can see how a digital game begins at the limits of itself, i.e. the surface from which it is being projected. Before that the game is just an object incapable of forming relationships with us. In order for this concept of limits to function the space between the player and the screen would also have to be understood materially, as without it the game would not be able to radiate outward from itself and join in the multitudinous relationships that makes up the player’s world. Game and player would for Heidegger be indissociable from their spacing. This is exemplified in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1953) by the act of wearing glasses: they are literally on the wearer’s nose yet further away than whatever thing that holds her attention. If, for example, the person playing the game wears glasses, or contact lenses for that matter, they are spatially closer to her than the game, but the game is closer in her mind than anything else.

Indeed the digital game can be completely immersive, as: “The human body is not limited by the superfice of his supposed body” (Heidegger 1996). The body brings us to a world as who we are, it is a constant entryway into the world which extends beyond our own skin. So when playing a game we are in the game and we are always arriving (Mitchell 2010). To Heidegger the body is not a means for doing things, it is not that we could play a game. Nor should it be thought of as thanks to the body we can play a game. “The body is no “I can”, but an “I am” (Mitchell 2010, p. 43), i.e. we are in the world, and the world is our abode. Our bodies, according to Heidegger, should be defined as the extent of our entire reach, it encompasses all that approaches and concerns us, and all that can we can touch and which can touch us. For
example when someone is playing an online game such as Destiny (Bungie 2015) they can be playing and interacting with friends on the other side of the world. These people concern them, and their actions in the game may touch them, their bodies are there because they are in that world together. The game is a space and in Heidegger’s own words:

Space spaces [der Raum räummt], spacing means clearing out [Roden], making free, setting free into a free area, an open, then it first affords [gewährt] with this free area the possibility of regions, of near and far, of directions and bounds, the possibilities of distances and magnitudes (Heidegger 1996, p. 11).

As such, this study suggests that a Heideggerian definition of a digital game could be viewing it as a means through which bodies may be distributed past themselves by entering and interacting with a virtual space. Space is a separation that allows for contact, rather than a divide to be bridged, and it is this permissiveness that makes it possible for a game space to allow us passage beyond ourselves.

3.4 The fourfold
When speaking of space and clearings, it is also necessary to briefly touch upon Heidegger’s concept of the fourfold [das Geviert], an idea that Heidegger himself describes somewhat cryptically:

The jug’s presencing is the pure, giving gathering of the onefold fourfold into a single time-space, a single stay. The jug precenses as a thing. The jug is the jug as a thing. But how does the thing presence? The thing things. Thinging gathers. Appropriating the fourfold, it gathers the fourfold’s stay, its while, into something that stays for a while: into this thing, that thing (2013, pp. 171-172).

Before going further into the nature of the fourfold we should consider the concept of the thing, in this quote exemplified by a jug. To Heidegger there is a difference between the thing and the Bestand, or standing-reserve, which are fundamentally opposed concepts in the way that they “acknowledge (or fail to acknowledge) the conditionality of entities and of their constructive practices” (Edwards 2007, p. 460). A thing is a gathering of the fourfold, while the Bestand is an entity brought to light by the practices of technology. Heidegger defined technology as: “the priority of machination, of discipline, and of method, over what it is that goes into them and is affected by them” and “the priority of ordering over what it is supposed to accomplish” (Heidegger 1989, p. 336, 397). Heidegger has often mistakenly been construed as a Luddite, but his stance on technology was actually far more complex and arguably largely a positive one (Dreyfus 1996). He saw a danger in allowing technology to control us, rather than the other way around. This is interesting to the subject of this paper, as a game console, or computer or any other technological device that is designed to run digital games, is not a thing, but Bestand.
As we approach them they are standing-reserve, an Xbox reveals itself to us as waiting to be turned on so that I can use it to play games, watch Netflix, or shop for digital content. When one uses an Xbox it disappears into our use of it, it is supposed to be there only insofar as it may be used without scrutiny or impediment. We use the Xbox because of what it does, as long as it does it without drawing attention to itself, not because of what it is. An Xbox is the same no matter where in the world you find it, no matter which one you turn on it will always do the same thing for anyone. And this is the reason why it is Bestand, that interchangeability and lack of distinctiveness. Note that this is not the same as being ready-to-hand, as a paintbrush for example, is different for a master painter than it is for a person without any artistic skill. Different paintbrushes perform differently and an artist must use them with scrutiny to achieve the desired results. A tv-remote on the other hand has buttons that are made to be pushed again and again, by anyone, with no special attention or need for delicacy. The paintbrush is a tool capable of being present-to-hand or ready-to-hand, but the remote only has a general nature that is “exhausted by” its “impersonal usefulness to any of us” (Edwards 2007, p. 459). An Xbox, or any other gaming platform: “…are entities the being of which fails to gather the manifold conditions of their coming to presence” (Edwards 2007, p. 459). This is not something that Heidegger considers to be a detriment to the quality of the product, it is rather an essential part of the Xbox, or a car, or a tv-set, or any technological entity, that they can disappear into our use of them. If the Xbox would draw explicit attention to itself it would after all be a rather poor choice for playing games on, just as a car would be a poor choice of transportation if we could not stop focusing on it, rather than on the road. We do not want an Xbox to obtrude on our consciousness when we play, the extent of its value to us is that it that allows us to be in the practice of playing without ever reflecting on the machine. To be a thing then logically, is to resist the obliteration of the devolving into Bestand, and thus we return to the previous example of the jug. The reason it “things”, as in gathers, the fourfold is that it: “makes clear in the thing itself the conditions of the life out of which the thing comes” (Edwards 2007, p. 464). But for that to make sense we need to briefly explain the fourfold itself. Heidegger says that to dwell is to belong to “belong within the fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities” (Heidegger 2013, p. 149), and that the fourfold is what “we call the world” (2013, p 177). Earth stands for all the things with which we share the earth as well as water and mineral. Sky stands for the literal sky, but also all the things we associate with it such as the moon and stars, the shifting of the seasons, the weather, the planets etc. Divinities Heidegger describes as “The beckoning messengers of the godhead” (2013 p. 176). It is a less straight forward concept and it is easy to assume it is somehow theological in nature, but Heidegger’s thought is not by and large
religious. Divinities stand instead for the role models of a culture, mythologized beings that collectively embody the best in us and give voice to that which is sacred to us by being who they are. They can be fictional, like Batman or Superman, or historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks. We live our lives in the light of our divinities, whether we recognize their inspiring example or not. Mortals are of course human beings, they are called mortals “because they can die” (Heidegger 2013, p.176). These four of the fourfold form a twofold together. Sky and earth is nature, and mortals and divinities come together by their common heritage to form a culture. What to dwell means then is to be “disposed to the epiphanies of dwelling” (Young 1996, pp. 386-387), to allow the fourfold of one's own dwelling to come to explicit presence.

3.5 Heidegger on Art

Works of art manifests their worlds to the viewer and by that same logic digital games as art manifest their worlds to the player. But works of art may perform three different functions: manifest; articulate, and reconfigure (Dreyfus 2007). Articulating works of art are able to establish a style, and founding works reconfigure it. Reconfiguration is a drawing up of a reserve of marginal practices bestowed by the culture in which this reconfiguration takes place. This reserve springs out of the style of a people’s language (Dreyfus 2007). The founding of new central practices takes place in three stages: bestowing, grounding and beginning, which correspond to past, present and future (Heidegger 2013). The bestowing is necessary because a new style of being must be intelligible, i.e. in some way grounded in the past. The grounding is when the marginal practices that are already present are taken up and made central in a new style. When the game design community moved from 2D to 3D for example it was initially merely a marginal practice, the gameplay was still grounded in convention with platforming games, action games, shooters etc. The practice was then quickly taken up as the central practice and during the 1990s 2D games gradually became marginal. Heidegger did not have a real world example of reconfiguring in his lifetime, and this paper will not go into detail on the matter. However, it is interesting to consider the art of digital games as being that reconfiguration, as it in many ways reflect the terms of Heidegger’s ontology of art.

Heidegger did not equate art with aesthetic experiences, in fact he was strongly opposed to that idea. In his Epilogue to Origin of the Work of Art (2013), he writes:

The way in which man experiences art is supposed to give information about its nature. Experience is the source that is standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment, but also for artistic creation. Everything is an experience. Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries. (p. 78)
The part about art “dying” has to do with the definition of art as being something that performs an interpretive function in a society from within the world of that society. When works of art are doing their work they unite people in a community by focusing our everyday practices and holding it up for all to see, they are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. This view has many similarities with communication studies and the concept of myth and signification (Fiske 2011). Heidegger’s example is the Greek temples which gave meaning to the Greeks lives by gathering what was important to their society under one roof, a fourfold of mortals, divinities, earth and sky. In the medieval Christian cathedral this was reconfigured into a gathering of saints and sinners, hell and heaven. Saints could not have existed in ancient Greece, any more than Greek heroes could have worked in the feudal medieval Europe. To Heidegger both of these examples are now dead, in that they no longer perform this function of gathering. This ability for works of art to work is because of what Heidegger calls reliability, a moniker for a tool’s ability to “negotiate a space beyond the control of Dasein” (Mitchell 2010, p. 9). Reliability connotes an openness to this beyond, with which the tool can maintain a relationship, serving as a doorway to the unexpected. Many people who played computer games in the 90s remember the impact of playing the game Myst (Cyan 1993), the world’s first photorealistic adventure game. At that time the game was a monumental success both artistically and financially, to its players it negotiated a space of uncertainty, a space beyond their control. In playing the game however they gradually wrested that control from the game and in time Myst’s openness to the unexpected faltered and decayed through habituation.

**Methodological Considerations**

Juxtaposing Heidegger’s philosophy on digital games there are two possible venues to take: to discuss the game as an artwork and its relation to the player as being-in-the-world (Dasein); or to discuss the game as a virtual world with the game characters as being in that world. As Heidegger’s thought first and foremost is grounded in the question of being and that question has merit both for the player and the character she plays, this paper will utilize both these perspectives in its analysis of 3 different games. The artwork as being in relation to Dasein will allow for a more complete consideration of Heideggerian thought, while the perspective of the media as a real world is commonly used in comparative literature and film theory (e.g. Creed 2011, Clover 2011, or Mulvey 2011) where it is common to see characters as fictive people (Jannidis, 2017). The games that will form the foundation for this Heideggerian game analysis are *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), and *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady 2009). These titles were chosen due to their status as
highly acclaimed and successful games that are both critically lauded and enjoy a large audience. The chances of the casual reader being at least superficially familiar with them is comparatively high. This also means that within the culture of gamers these games represent what Heidegger would call central practices, they are paradigmatic of today’s game scene. The paper will briefly touch upon some other titles as well, when the analysis requires specific examples.

4.1 The Primary Titles

*Mass Effect 3* is a third-person science fiction role-playing game where the player takes on the role of Commander Shepard, a soldier that throughout the Mass Effect series of games gradually becomes the saviour of, not only mankind, but the entire galaxy. Shepard as a character is governed by player input and through him (or her, the game lets the player choose appearance and gender, and adjusts the game world to fit) she may affect relations, politics and the tide of history by influencing Shepard’s sense of morality. *Mass Effect 3* is marked by its strong and realistically portrayed characters whose personalities and goals shift depending on their interactions with Shepard and the circumstances those interactions lead them into. A character might for example be driven to suicide or live to triumph depending on Shepard’s moral decisions. The world of *Mass Effect 3* is vast and rich in content, however it is also heavily compartmentalized to fit the plot structure and therefore more linear and restrictive of player freedom than it may initially appear to be.

*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Henceforth: *Skyrim*) is a first-person fantasy role-playing game where the player creates an avatar through which to act inside the world of Skyrim. As opposed to Commander Shepard this avatar has no real personality traits and the game world instead reacts entirely on the player’s actions and circumstances. If the player does the citizens of a small village a few favours that village will allow him to purchase real estate there, and if the player is turned into a vampire the entire game world’s population will become hostile until she is cured. In *Skyrim* the player is god and the world is her sandbox, consequences are few and the narrative is always second to the exploration and exploitation of the game’s mechanics. The world of *Skyrim* was one of the largest game worlds ever created upon its original release and unlike the other two games used in this analysis it is completely open, limiting the players access only with the difficulty of the enemies encountered in each area.

*Batman: Arkham Asylum* is a third-person action game with a set narrative that unfolds as the player successfully masters the gameplay mechanics to progress through the linear plot. In *Batman: Arkham Asylum* the player takes on the gestalt of the famed comic-book hero and sees
herself reflected in this pop icon, driving his exploits and thereby assuming responsibility for them. It is a classic case of narcissistic scopophilia (Mulvey 2011) which by a majority of critics was considered successful in the way it made the player experience what it would be like to be Batman. The game world of Batman: Arkham Asylum is strictly linear with a ‘hub area’ from which the player then accesses different levels that become available in a certain order to maintain the cohesion of the plot.

The three games represent three different stances on player character: in Skyrim she is a tabula rasa created from scratch by the player; in Batman: Arkham Asylum he is Batman, a character well established in numerous comic books, movies and tv-series, and in Mass Effect 3 she is something in between, a character with a voice and a purpose yet with a malleable consciousness. The games also have three very different takes on the nature of their worlds, from the open and free vistas of Skyrim, to the carefully designed spaces of Mass Effect 3 and Batman: Arkham Asylum, where the former strives to eradicate its limits by presenting the player with massive skylines and futuristic visions, and the latter revels in dark hiding places fuelled by gothic architecture.

4.2 Method of Analysis
These titles will be analysed by performing a close reading on them during play by using methods for hermeneutic inquiries into digital games suggested by Tanenbaum (2015), while allowing for the differences in a Heideggerian approach as opposed to Tanenbaum’s based on the works of Husserl and Gadamer. This analysis takes the form of a close reading of the game as a work of art, namely as an object manifesting a world to those outside it (Heidegger 2013). As a phenomenological analysis this paper takes no interest in the game developer’s intentions when making the game. The analysis also ignores any historical or economic factors, as well as any personal issues among the creators or other factors that may have impacted the game’s development.

When doing a close reading it is essential to bracket anything that is outside of the work itself to avoid confirming any potential bias of the researcher. The game is after all indifferent to what the player thinks of it. In this particular case it is not a major consideration as the subject of phenomenology itself hinges on one letting things be themselves. Had the purpose been for example a Marxist or Postcolonial reading of games there would have been a greater pressure on part of the researcher to find things within the text that corresponded to the theory in question. Nonetheless, in order to provide a dependable and transparent analysis, it is important to direct
the reader to the “observable text of the games” throughout (Tanenbaum 2015, p. 79). This enables other scholars to replicate, confirm or dispute the present study.

**A Heideggerian Game Analysis**

From a perspective of everydayness one might discuss all three games as projects and how well they keep the player in a primordial state of being absorbed in a meaningful life-world (Guignon 1996). That is, how good are the games at immersing players in their space and allowing them to stay in a state of flow? All three games have adjustable difficulty to fit different players comfort levels and thereby avoiding unnecessary persistent present-to-hand breakdowns. Interruptions are not necessarily bad per se, remember that temporary unready-to-hand moments allow us to see the web of functional relations surrounding the thing with which we interacted. In a game such as *Batman: Arkham Asylum* this is key to the element of challenge as the short moments of interruption when the player fails and reloads the latest checkpoint allow her to reflect on her possibilities and form new strategies from what she learned from failure.

The level of control afforded by the user interface would also be of interest as how well we may communicate through the gamepad is key to our flow, just as a good pen would allow us to write comfortably and without interruption, a well-conceived control scheme allows us to interact effortlessly and without reflection within the game space. The controller is how the player brings forth the game-as-art, and in that act she is more akin to an artist. And just as the poet’s quill or painter’s brush should not be in a state of interposition between the artist and material, neither should the game controller (Mitchell 2010). For the game’s limit to encounter the player and transform her, the controller must also be transformed as it cannot be a stopgap measure for bridging the divide between player and game. In a practical sense this means that the controls must disappear, they must be entirely given so that they can be part of pure participation in the game. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* both excels and fails at this mediation, with controls that are wonderfully fluid and easy to grasp while at the same time utilizing the concept of quick-time events where players are expected to press a button that is flashing on the screen as quickly as possible to progress. From a Heideggerian standpoint this is a poor venue for game design to have taken as it serves to remind the player of the controller as a present-at-hand object. Suddenly she is reminded that she is indeed holding a controller and that a certain button on it need to be pressed immediately. Now the controller has become the stopgap between the player and the game, like an artist who suddenly has to focus on her brush instead of the picture she was conjuring on the canvas. These moments exist in *Mass Effect 3* as well, but here they
are far less intrusive and do not require tedious repeat tries that serve to exasperate the game controller’s unreadiness.

5.1 The Becoming of Playing

We have discussed how, when playing games one is in a sense in that world, that we are able to pass into the game-as-art (Mitchell 2010), and from this standpoint we may discuss what it is to be a being-in-the-game-world as it were. In *Mass Effect 3* the player uses dialog options in Commander Shepard’s interactions with friends and foes to make him become the person that they wish him to be. As the game progresses Shepard slowly becomes something that he was not, and so is the player. Playing *Mass Effect 3* is to be in an in between, and the becoming towards something, but this also means that it is the gradual becoming away from something else (Mitchell 2010). As the player uses moral decisions to shape the galaxy around her, she is also eroding that which she decided against. The tyrannical and power hungry madman that is renegade Shepard, the result of the player always picking morally reprehensible options, is the complete erosion of what he could have been. And it is mirrored in that it is the complete becoming away for the player as hero of the game-space, and her becoming towards that which she has driven Shepard into. In this way the game highlights how every decision paves the way to another one like it in a downward or upward spiral. The game may take the player from an in between towards the highest highs or the lowest lows, and because she knows that there is always another way the game never lets her forget what it is she is becoming away from. *Mass Effect 3* is steeped in decisions, and these decisions breed uncertainty which may be called the frontier in all implicit game aesthetics (Bateman 2015). But the game is at the same time flawed in how it advertises these decisions, colouring the morally upright ‘Paragon’ decisions blue and the violent ‘Renegade’ decisions red, as if to make the player consider the certainty of the becoming toward that is depending on her decision. This has two problems, first of which being that it makes decisions less real by warning the player of the results. “Every decision…bases itself in something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would not be a decision.” (Heidegger 1971, p. 55). Arguably, to colour the options takes away some of this, and thus also takes away some part of the decision, diminishing player agency. Secondly, while the nature of the dialogue options mean that a decision will always be disclosed somewhat as it is a potential future for Commander Shepard’s mind state, however the implicit colouring of the options invite critical reflection and choices that are meaningful and important to our lives is not and should not be accessible to this kind of thematic thought (Dreyfus 1996). When the player makes important decisions through Commander Shepard they are decisions made by him
in what is supposed to be his element, his normal coping should suffice and the player should not be invited to succumb to critical thinking, but rather be invited to embody Shepard’s social skills and cope with the situation as he would. The system fails to address the rudiments of what it means to be Commander Shepard, to be a human being in the future world of the *Mass Effect* universe. By signalling the consequences of decisions beforehand the game makes things, which for a being-in-the-world [Dasein] should never be thus, explicit. The game also offers quicktime events where a push of the trigger at the right moment makes Shepard act immediately, these moments are also broadcasted as either ‘bad’ or ‘good’ using semiotic symbols, but they do a better job of making the player feel like she is acting out a decision based on Shepard’s gut feeling.

5.2 Cultural Practices within the Game World
Looking at how well *Mass Effect 3* does at making the player embody their in-game persona it is essential to also consider how the game fares at explaining the social practices of its own universe. The way commander Shepard treats his crew, the way he is open and accepting of different sexualities and interspecies relations, the way he always stands several feet away from people when having a conversation with them, these are all results of his understanding of what it means to be human [Friendly, liberal, respectful of personal spaces etc.]. This is Shepard’s cultural know-how, something that is neither conscious nor unconscious, but rather a form of savoir faire presumably endemic of people in his culture (Dreyfus 1996). It is not a question of something explicit, like rules or laws, but of the rudiments of what it means for Shepard to be a human being. These are things that Shepard presumably picked up through imitation while growing up in the world he resides. To be Shepard, to play him, involves an understanding of what it means to be a Salarian [aliens with a short life span and paranoid minds], a Krogan [aliens who were made sterile by a biogenic weapon created by the Salarians to cripple their ability to wage war], a heatsink pack [a means of bleeding off the heat created by weapons], or a Pyjak [an extraterrestrial primate]. Shepard understands what it means to order a drink on the citadel, a space station light years away from earth. He understands that he is giving the bartender a far greater confidence than we usually would give the person serving us drinks, since different species have different metabolisms and therefore what makes a Turian drunk could kill a human. The *Mass Effect* games touch upon this lethal aspect of interstellar binging on several occasions, even showing a racist bartender murdering humans with beverages unsuited for our species (*Mass Effect 2* 2010). Every time Shepard orders a drink that decision bases itself on something concealed, he takes a calculated risk which is not conscious, but not
subconscious either. It is a risk that all humans of his cultural practices are aware of, and one they accept for the sake of becoming inebriated on another world. Embodying Shepard the player is perhaps not fully made to understand this, but the game does try, which is in itself to its credit.

In *Skyrim* there is a marked lack of cultural practices that are not centred on the player and her metapRACTices as a player. The world of *Skyrim* has a relatively richly conceived culture with shops, blacksmiths, guilds, city guards, regents and taverns, but it is arguably all in service of the player and therefore the culture falls flat. There are no farmers working the lands because the player does not need anything from them, no masons because the cities never grow or change, no economy outside of the money changing hands between player and the various purveyors of goods useful to her. The player character is merely a self-insert of the player herself, and therefore she has no agency outside of that of the player. There is little in the game containing an understanding of what it means to be a *being* in *Skyrim*, and because of this the world is muted.

In sum, the practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human being, those containing an interpretation of what it means to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. Social practices thus transmit not only an implicit understanding of what it is to be a human being, an animal, or an object, but, finally, an understanding of what it is for anything to be at all (Dreyfus 1996, p. 351).

What is it for anything to be at all in *Skyrim*? The game focuses so much on the player’s quest for loot and XP’s [experience points, the meta-currency of all role-playing-games with which the player raises her statistics to grow in power and ability], that it fails to provide a breathing culture where the player may struggle for power and wealth. The player character does not know what it means to be a Draugr [undead warrior], Falmer [sentient subterranean species] or Dremora [sentient race of demigods] in *Skyrim*, she only knows what they are to the player herself: resources to be used (Dreyfus 1996). Take for example the Draugr, who are legion in *Skyrim*, guarding tombs all over the countryside and exhibiting a feudal system with warriors at the bottom and priests as the leading caste. The player may learn that they are sentient, that they have a religion, and even that their cultural practices have been observed by scholars. But none of these intricacies ever surface beyond expository texts in books found throughout the game. There is no understanding of the cultures in Skyrim since the game prefers concepts to social skills: “All intelligibility presupposes something that cannot be articulated – A kind of knowing how rather than a knowing what” (Dreyfus 1996, p. 349-350). To the player as a being, the Draugr and any other ‘enemy race’ are simply walking repositories of loot and XP’s, to be
discarded for valuable resources. *Skyrim* knows what the world it presents looks like culturally, but the game misrepresents its own lore by focusing on what the game is as a game, rather than what it is as a place, as a world. And because of this we find thousands of supposedly sentient beings walking straight into the player’s sword seemingly without hesitation, because they do not know what it means to be anything at all, except fodder.

In regards to the concept of everyday understanding, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is a different proposition entirely than both *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*. It casts the player in the role of a character that has been well-established in several different other mediums, and as such the cultural practices of his world can be, and remain, unarticulated (Dreyfus 1996). This allows the player’s journey through Arkham Asylum as the caped crusader to attain a meaningfulness, because it stays within the set parameters of Batman as a character and the world that he inhabits. Batman’s essence is not dictated by himself, nor by the player acting as Batman, but by the other characters inhabiting the game world. Batman is constituted as who he is because he shares a world, Gotham City, with the Joker, Commissioner Gordon, Poison Ivy etc., he exists in a way that is structured by them (Dreyfus 2007). In the *Mass Effect* world, the player’s social actions towards the people surrounding Shepard shapes his essence over the course of three games, and since the player *is* Shepard and sees an ideal self, reflected in him (Mulvey 1974), she too is shaped by the game world and find meaning in being there.

5.3 The Game as Efficient Production
This is symptomatic of a tendency within the *Skyrim* game dynamics to strive towards what Heidegger would have considered ‘contemporary production’ (Mitchell 2010), that is, production that is defined by a drive for production that can never be satisfied. There is always better *loot* for the player to find, be it through story progression or spelunking through a random cave or abandoned underground city. As the player finds a new armour or a better sword she is already aware that there will be something even better in the next dungeon. Thus the production, i.e. the act of playing, is never-ending. Levelling up her skill in smithcraft, the player can create hundreds of perfectly identical weapons and armours by herself. Even game items once prized for their rarity may eventually be duplicated at any forge, turning once unique objects into mass-produced products off the assembly line. A prized possession such as a hard-won magic sword found at the bottom of an ancient mine quickly becomes obsolete and useless in *Skyrim*, as the game’s systems pushes the player to constantly replace old with new. This system obstructs *Skyrim*’s intraworldly objects unveiledness in that the player is made to think of swords merely as a statistic trait on her damage output, and dragon harnesses as an armour rating. In fact, even
people become raw materials for the player in *Skyrim*; within the intricate landscapes of the game world resides many humans and sentient beings without any personality beyond immediate aggression towards the player. They are there to provide the game’s most important commodity: XP. The act commonly known as ‘levelling up’. The player is expected to kill hundreds of nameless opponents in his quest for attaining personal perfection at the highest level. In order to get the best armours and weapons in the game, the player is expected to murder dragons and demons and harvest their bones and organs for the production. Living creatures are arguably the game’s most important raw materials, the will of the player has led to the people of Skyrim to become the objects of the abandonment of being (Mitchell, 2010). The result of this abandonment of being is that the entities in *Skyrim* appear as objects, interchangeable components that the player cuts off from whatever place he finds them in, thereby making it impossible for anything in the game to connect to any context or meaning that would allow them to “become manifest in their being” (Guignon 1996). This makes all beings in *Skyrim* “un-beings”, they are objectified by the game mechanics, their essential fullness is concealed, and “that which imparts focus, coherence belongingness, and a richness of possibilities to things – is blotted out of view” (Heidegger 1977, p. 174). Neither *Batman: Arkham Asylum* or *Mass Effect 3* are beholden to this arguably detrimental quality, but among digital games there are many titles, such as *Diablo III* (Blizzard 2012) and the *Borderlands* Series (Gearbox Software 2009-2012), where contemporary production can be said to drive the entire experience.

5.4 The Art of the Game-as-Art as Work
As the reliability of *Skyrim* diminishes with play, i.e. as the narrative elements of the game dwindle, gameplay becomes more and more defined by its serviceability. There is in the beginning of Skyrim an excess which is directed toward a beyond of uncertainty. In the verdant grandeur of the game world’s nature there exists a radiance, the earth presented by the art-work done by *Skyrim* shines, and the world facilitates that shining through relations of significance (Mitchell 2010). But this reliability is doomed to give way to serviceability, as it slowly decays through habituation. “Thus equipmentality wastes away, sinks into mere stuff. In such wasting, reliability vanishes” now “only blank usefulness now remains visible” (Heidegger 2013, p. 34). Reliability is something that surpasses blank usefulness and tends a relationship with the unknown, keeping the artwork shining in all its relations.

This is not to say that traditional game mechanics are necessarily a bad thing or a problem for the being in the game. The mundanity and somewhat unoriginal mechanics of playing as Sheperd are essential to *Mass Effect 3’s utility*, and thereby also to its reliability.
Here one must consider the historicity of RPG’s in western culture and its relation to the levelling mechanics in *Skyrim* in particular. The point of levelling up in modern games is often just that, *to level up*. The notion of levelling up however goes back to before the onset of digital gaming and it is but a way of illustrating a player character becoming more powerful through experience and training. The concept of gaining power through experience in games has become subject to what Heidegger refers to as *concealment*, i.e. the idea of levelling up and its conventions as a particular form of presenting experience in games has come to be seen as the ultimate truth of the matter (Guignon 1993).

5.5 The Fourfold of the Game World
In *Poetically Man Dwells*... (2013) Heidegger talks of a particular kind of human life, *the poetic dwelling on the earth as mortal*. Every human life is one of poetic dwelling, even if some people’s life are as such onlyprivatively “One can dwell by explicitly refusing to dwell; one can also dwell in disabling ignorance of what one’s proper dwelling is” (Edwards 2007). To reiterate: dwelling on earth is to be “disposed to the epiphanies of dwelling” (Young 1996, pp. 386-387). A game’s openness to the unexpected, its excess of reliability that allows it to radiate is what makes the player so disposed (Mitchell 2010). Looking at the three games in terms of the fourfold it is easy to see how *Skyrim* could be closer to: “a unitary fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, which is stayed in the thinging of things we call – the world” (Heidegger 2013, p. 197). *Skyrim* is in essence an open world where the player is set free to forge her own destiny in a fantastical plane of heroes and monsters and mythical strife, or so it purports to be. But the player in *Skyrim* is not mortal, and neither are the non-player characters of the game as they are either made immortal to protect the player’s ability to finish the narrative, or unkillable by anyone but the player to ensure she may encounter them. Because of this the mortals of *Skyrim* do not dwell poetically, and thus they cannot measure themselves against the heavenly. Earth and sky, divinities and mortals – being at one with one another of their own accord – belong together by way of the simpleness of the united fourfold. Each of the four mirrors in its own way the presence of the others. Each therewith reflects itself in its own way into its own, within the simpleness of the four. This mirroring does not portray a likeness. The mirroring, lightening each of the four, appropriates their own presencing into simple belonging to one another. Mirroring in this appropriating-lightening way, each of the four plays to each of the others. The appropriative mirroring sets each of the four free into its own, but it binds these free ones into its simplicity of their essential being toward one another. (Heidegger 2013, p. 177)

*Mass Effect 3* manages to evoke the fourfold within its limits: Shepard and his companions are all mortals, capable of death as death; Shepard is fighting for earth and during the game as he mounts the final defence of the planet he presents earth, all of the earth and sky is radiating
through him as he is the manifestation of them both; this also makes him and his companions divinities, as on earth the population await their return as messengers from another world to come. In this way the game *Mass Effect 3*, as a thing, gathers all the conditions of its being in simple oneness. Shepard belongs to earth, as a mortal, earth belongs to Shepard as he is its future, Shepard belongs to the divinities as he moves toward his own transformation, the divinities belong to Shepard as he is the key to the transformation of the world. The thing gathers, *Mass Effect 3* is thinging. This is also describable as being a biblical story, with Shepard as the saint and the reapers as the devils, however this does not change the reading as Heidegger himself noted that the Christian history is itself a version of the fourfold that comprises a cultural paradigm (Heidegger 2013). The Christian myth is one that produces a shared understanding in western culture (Dreyfus 1996), and as such this connection in *Mass Effect 3* allows players to presuppose possibilities of action within the game, and thus further solidify a sense of being.

But do not think that *Skyrim* is entirely without merit in terms of its ability to bring out one’s fourfold. There are moments, quiet ones, when one walks along an unknown mountain path and the sun starts setting, that the beauty and detail of *Skyrim*’s nature does bring about epiphanies of what it means to dwell primordially, in a world without technology. In these instances the clumsy mechanics concealing the game world such as inventory management, levelling up, aggressive un-beings and the constant striving towards efficiency, all melt away, and the game-as-art is manifesting a world to the player who dwells poetically.

The thing stays – gathers and unites – the fourfold. The thing things world. Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple worldhood of world. (Heidegger 2013, p. 178)

The presence of *Skyrim*’s nature is “radiant” (Heidegger 2013, p. 181) and when it is free to be a world, it appropriates the player into its fourfold. This happens, not despite of the game not giving the player anything to do but be in nature, but because of it. The player free of any *Bestand* which would obtrude upon the conditionality of the situation, is made to focus on a presencing. In this situation the player is her character, who becomes a mortal, who measures herself in the divinities of the dimension of sky and earth, and the fourfold gathers around the thing that is *Skyrim*. 
5.6 Digital Game Characters and Death as Death

The concept of death is more often than not problematic in digital games as it is more often a function of the game’s ruleset than actually reflective of a ‘good death’ (Heidegger 2013). In both *Skyrim* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum* the player character simply perishes. There is a screen informing the player that they have failed, their tether in the game space is no more and they must reload from a checkpoint or a recent save. At this point they are transported back in time and may retry the project that caused them to perish, Batman lives again, and their soulless insert of the *Skyrim*-player materializes unharmed in her sandbox. *Mass Effect 3* handles death in two ways, the first one is the same as in the other two games, and indeed as in most games on sale today; Shepard perishes and a “death-screen” asks the player to reload from the last checkpoint and/or save. This is not death, the player knows that she just has to reload to have him back again, healthy as ever. The interesting way that *Mass Effect 3* handles death comes at the end of the game.

The mortals are human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies, the animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it. Death is the shrine of nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. (Heidegger 2013, p. 176)

Similarly the self-insert in *Skyrim* and *Batman* (at least within the confines of the game in question), have no death neither ahead of themselves nor behind them. But Commander Shepard dies death as death, and it is a good death. He has an end and he faces that end without anxiety. But even Batman as a character will at some point have a death, this is intrinsic to any fan. We know Batman will eventually die, and we know that this will affect the people around him greatly. Playing *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, we know that he will not die yet, we accept the game’s fail state as an inevitability of the action-game format, but we do not see the fail states as the death of Batman, only the game’s intended narrative is accepted. However we can see a future in Gotham city where he is no longer present, we see Batman as a person, and as such one that is capable of death as death. The self-insert in *Skyrim* cannot have this and therefore it is condemned to a state of un-being. We cannot grow old in *Skyrim*, nor can we really envision a functioning life in this world that is so completely lacking in the fourfold (Heidegger 2013).
Heidegger and Game Theory

One of the largest weaknesses of widely used game theories like MDA and the tetrad is that they break down a game experience into basic components that make different games seem largely identical. Looking at, for example: *Mass Effect 3* and *Skyrim*, both games are role-playing-games where the player moves, fight enemies, levels up, and interacts with NPC’s. The games are very different but they still use the same basic principles of player interaction. Another example: *Doom* (ID Software) and *Parodius* (Konami), are both games about moving and shooting. However, *Doom* is a science-fiction-horror action game experienced from a first-person perspective where the player fights an uphill battle against the forces of hell, while *Parodius* is a 2D-space-shooter with a cartoony aesthetic where the player squares off against flying anthropomorphic ship-cats. As spaces these games places us in completely different worlds, but from a thematic or reflective point of view they merely look different. MDA and other similar methods shows us that there are many ways of employing the same ways of interacting with game space to very different results, the same way as there are many ways of applying paint to a canvas. However when it comes to discussing the game as itself, as art, these theories cannot help us deepen our understanding. As in art history the field of Connoisseurship is useful for identification and analysis of the artwork as present-at-hand object, so too is MDA for digital games.

Games are an art form with aesthetic properties that are a function of the particular types of responses they elicit in players who experience them in the proper way (Cogburn and Silcox 2009), a thesis that resonates with the game theory that games create behaviour through interaction (Hunicke et al. 2004). This interaction is facilitated through a physical controller such as computer mice, keyboards, joysticks and gamepads; tools by which the player may experience the game-as-art in the proper way. Heidegger opposed the thought of art as a confrontation with recalcitrant materials but saw instead the making of art as a mutual interpretation, as mediation (Mitchell 2010). As the game-as-art is experienced, the tools are not merely intermediaries between the player and the game space, mediation requires two parties and for there to be mediation the tool itself must also be transformed. The limits of the player and the game space becomes a site of encounter and transformation. The game controller must not be interposed between the two mutual parties, “Mediation is the fact that nothing is present, everything is given, and everything bleeds and leaks outside itself, as participation in a medium.” (Mitchell 2010, p. 77).
6.1 Solid Gameplay without a Soul

Looking at the constant amassing of ‘loot’ in *Skyrim* one encounters an interesting discrepancy between Heidegger and current game theory. The reason so many games employ the loot dynamic, i.e. driving gameplay engagement by feeding the player progressively better items, is that it is something empirically proven as a source for enjoyment. However, a Heideggerian analysis would have us consider this a dead end of game design as it is the objectification of the underlying technology of the entities within the game world. *Skyrim* is a game which certainly falls under this description, but there are other games that makes this trait the player’s soul concern (e.g. *Diablo III*, Blizzard; *Victor Vran*, Haemimont; *Sacred*). Titles where the driving force behind player engagement is the harvest of entities to produce interchangeable non-beings is not art, but merely a presentation of one of our technological world’s essential aspects: a drive towards maximum yield at minimum expense (Heidegger 1977). Games like *Diablo III* have players kill thousands of monsters, time and time again, to harvest them for better and better loot, so that they may become better at killing monsters and be able to get better loot for less invested effort. In a case such as this the player is not playing a game anymore, she is merely a part of a very efficient system for spending time. The player is not a subject playing a game, she is used by the game to drive its cycle. “Whatever stands by in the sense of standing reserve [Bestand] no longer stands over against us as object” (Heidegger 1977, p, 17). This brings us to the question of being in a digital game context: if our being is defined by the fact that we are beings-in-a-world [Dasein], can games be defined in terms of what we are within their world? After all, who is the player in a game such as *Skyrim*, we have already concluded that her being a being there is problematic as the world is incapable of treating her as such. The thing about letting the player create their own character in *Skyrim* or any other RPG like it, such as the *Fallout* games from *Skyrim* publisher Bethesda (e.g. *Fallout 3* 2008, *Fallout New Vegas* 2012, *Fallout 4* 2014), is that whether it is you or I who creates it, the game will still be the same. This *unconditionality* is a property of technology, conceived of as unconditional we are cut free of everything that matters, except ourselves. If we are what we are in *Skyrim*, only in reference to ourselves, then there is arguably nothing that we need to care for (Edwards 2007).
6.2 Games as Using Technology Rather than Being Used
It is important to remember that Heidegger was not an enemy of technology, in fact, he freely admitted that technology is necessary for our continued progress as a species.

It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil. We depend on technical devices; they even challenge us to ever greater advances. (Heidegger 1975, p. 53)

He was concerned that humans become so dominated by technology that we lose our nature in this process. The essence of modern technology to Heidegger was that it stands for optimal ordering and efficiency for its own sake (Dreyfus 1996). Heidegger tells us that it is possible to live with this technological nihilism as long as we recognize that it is not the only clearing, nor the only end. That we consider technological devices as not being absolute, but rather dependent on something higher (Heidegger 1975).

That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws (i.e., our understanding of being) is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, openness to the mystery (Heidegger 1975, p. 55)

In his article on Heidegger: Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics (1996), Dreyfus writes:

Some of our practices could come together in a new cultural paradigm that held up to us a new way of doing things – a new paradigm that opened a world in which these practices and others were central whereas efficient ordering was marginal (1996, p. 366)

Digital games are dependent on technology for our comportment into their space, but game worlds are also domains of the unexpected, of uncertainty (Bateman 2015). Digital games do not destroy technology, and neither is technology the only end of digital games. Rather, games as art puts all the power of technology into their service to open up a relational space of possibilities, ready for human dwelling (Mitchell 2010).

6.3 Games as Art in Suspended Animation
The issue that Heidegger sees with art in regards to its reliability comes from the art being that “which opens up a world”, in his own example the temple of Acropolis is no longer art since the work in its art-work has long since ceased to function. To the ancient Greeks they were a reminder of the conditions under which they all existed as a society, the temples held up their practices and gathered their culture into a shared understanding (Dreyfus 2007). Now this excess of reliability is gone and the temple exist only in its serviceability. But games are not only art, they are also worlds in their own right and as such they are capable of doing the work they do within their own worlds. And these virtual realms never change, the fourfold within them is preserved every time a player brings the presencing of the fourfold into things. Every
time a player walks up to a bridge in *Skryrim* and sees how it gathers the landscape, bringing stream and riverbanks into each other’s neighbourhood, and how it directs the stream for a moment towards the sky with its vaulted gateway (Heidegger 2013), they can experience the thing. In the virtual space of games as art it might even be possible to recreate the Acropolis as a work of art once again, with a virtual world that sees itself defined in its manifesting their shared history.

We should also return briefly to the notion of the founding works of art that reconfigure the style of a culture. The digital age is one very different from the one Heidegger lived in, and one could certainly find some interesting examples of potentially founding works among digital games. Philosopher Grant Tavinor wrote in *The Art of Video Games* (2009) that “though they (video games) significantly align with art, video games may count as a new and distinctive kind of art” (p. 196). Digital games were indeed not long ago a marginal practice, unintelligible for most people, seen mostly as a hobby for a young, predominantly male clientele. But with time it has grown into the largest business in the entertainment industry, surpassing that of cinema and music (Games Industry 2016, Statista 2016, and IFPI 2016).

Games run on technology, they do not work without it, but games-as-art do not strive for efficiency or control, rather they turn all the power of computer processing into the service of opening up an infinite universe of clearings to its players. To dwell is to be on earth, but for an increasing many of us there are steadily decreasing opportunities to actually do so. In Heidegger’s own words: “Mortals would never be capable of dwelling if it was merely a staying on earth”, “Rather, dwelling itself is always a staying with things” (2013, p. 149). But to dwell is to spare and preserve, and in modern life there is always the

> In Greece and the Middle Ages, “things” gathered the fourfold to presence for an entire culture. In the modern ages they can still gather for an *us*, though a smaller, more private “*us*” than in the past. But things can also gather just for me. (Young 1996, p. 386)

Games-as-art can help, and are arguably already helping, in keeping human receptivity for the endangered practices of pre-technological civilization alive. In digital games people who have grown up in large cities and never experienced nature may experience the thinging of the thing and the worlding of the world, and dwell poetically in a work of art that is rich enough, and influential enough to reconfigure their world.
Our Continued Being in Games
It is arguable that a Heidegger-derived phenomenological analysis of digital games raises questions about and reveals aspects of digital games and their nature. The analysis finds strong support for the continued study into the implications of phenomenology and manifestationalism on digital games, not only as art, but as space, as clearings and as modes of being. If games as art are a means through which bodies may be distributed past themselves by entering and interacting with a virtual space, then it is relevant to study what it means to be in that space. The advantage of a phenomenological game analysis is that it does not concern itself with any of the aspects beholden to current game theories, while at the same time being synergetic with them all. For example, compared to the MDA-framework none of the concerns of that method of analysis are the locus of a Heideggerian game-thought. But at the same time MDA supports the latter by providing context and evidence to the relevancy of its findings, and the phenomenological analysis provides another dimension to the overall analysis by answering questions that the former is not designed to address. While this paper has focused on the discussion of games as art, the method is not in any way related to aesthetics. To Heidegger aesthetic experience “is the element where art dies” (Heidegger 2013, p. 77), and art is instead something that performs either or all of the ontological functions of manifesting; articulating, and reconfiguring the style of a culture within the world of that culture. To analyse digital games from Heideggerian thought does not collide with current game theory, rather it helps game designers to see what their own field has disclosed by unconcealing what it means to be in their games. Through a phenomenological reading of Skyrim this paper has shown how paradigmatic design practices lessens the sense of being-in-a-game-world, and thereby the immersiveness of the game space. Using Heidegger’s fourfold the gaps in the game world’s fullness are laid bare, and a sense of how much of Dasein that particular space can accommodate. Persistent game mechanics such as experience points, randomized loot, NPC’s with no reason for being except furthering the player’s agenda, or sentient life without any behaviour outside of outright hostility, are all examples of humdrum game design with decades of history. Phenomenological game design would have us go back to the things themselves, to look at games as worlds and seek to destroy these notions of games needing to be held up by stale rule sets. To paraphrase Heidegger: there is in game theory a lack of what it means to be in a game.

7.1 In Regards to the Validity of Heideggerian Thought
When using philosophy (or as in the case with Heidegger: thought) it is important to address the issue of whether this particular mode of interpretation is “true”, why would a Heideggerian
reading be better than a Hegelian, or Kantian one? Heidegger distinguishes between two types of truth, the first one is the ordinary philosophical sense of truth through which we discover facts about the world through assertion (Heidegger 1953). This type of truth Heidegger calls Entdeckenheit, or discoveredness, and describes it as the truth about things that do not have the character of Dasein, that is, truths that do not concern our being. The other sense of truth, and the one that this paper is based upon, is called Erschlossenheit, or disclosedness, which is the truth that is revealed through understanding. Heidegger posits that understanding entails not only making assertions about the world, but “grasping the entire being-in-the-world” (Hoy 1996, p.184). Our understanding of the world as Dasein is not distinct from our understanding of ourselves, and thus in understanding the world we are also interpreting ourselves. Disclosure always involves both the world and Dasein simultaneously, and thus understanding grasps both the world and our way of being in the world, indicating understanding of the world is always a self-understanding as well (Hoy 1996). This is key to this paper as we are discussing what it means to be in a game world. Self-interpretation through disclosure shows us how we are dealing with the question of our own existence. Current Game Theory involves the discovery of facts about particular features of a game world such as mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics, technology, or narratives. Heidegger would argue that both this discovery and disclosure is necessary to understand games, as focusing entirely on the discovery of facts will obscure the dimension of disclosure. We cannot understand why the game world of Mass Effect or Skyrim are considered better and more immersive than their peers by looking at an aggregate of facts, we need an account of what enables these facts in the first place. The player in the game world is understanding both the game and what it means to be in the game, and is interpreting herself as she is understanding the game world and herself in it. This discovery is not derived from factual features, the player does not understand the game world as a series of menus and commands within a visual interface. She understands the game world from the disclosure of its possibilities, which allows her to make assertions about it. Simply put: disclosure is what makes discoveries intelligible (Hoy 1996). When entering a game world the player does not know herself off the bat, and to recover her identity she must come to understand her possibilities in the game-worldly situation in which she finds herself. Heidegger tells us that these possibilities are not subjective or internal phenomena based in personal notions, but are always tethered to our worldly situations. In the context of game worlds we can certainly concur that the possibilities of a game world are tied to the situational context, as well as the affordances of the mechanics.
…more reflective operations such as explaining, deliberating, or deciding would ever be possible only by supervening on a larger background of features that could never be explicitly thematised, but that nevertheless were part of the understanding and thus the concrete possibilities (Hoy 1996, p. 187)

“Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding must already have understood what it is to be interpreted” (Heidegger BT 194), this “hermeneutic circle” characterizes all understanding. To put it within the context of this thesis there must already be a context of intelligibility if we are to make any discoveries or draw any conclusions about digital games. Thus, when discussing being in digital games from the standpoint of Heideggerian thought one must accept that *Dasein’s*, our, understanding of being is basically implicit (Boedeker JR 2007).

Cogburn and Silcox (2008) would also lift the objectivity argument which states that: “1) there are objective facts about what makes a work of art valuable; 2) it is always possible to engage in rational argumentation about matters of objective fact; 3) it is not possible to engage in rational argumentation about the appropriateness of a person’s affective responses to a work of art, and 4) therefore, what makes a work of art valuable is not in any way a function of affective response to it” (2008, p. 96). The point of the phenomenological analysis is that it only concerns itself with the work that the artwork does as a work of art, all considerations of aesthetic experience are considered irrelevant. By empirically analysing the games and framing the scope of the contribution as a phenomenological investigation this paper seeks to provide evidenced judgements of the games as text, and as lived experiences (Tanenbaum 2015). The results herein are grounded in gameplay that is observable and reproducible.

7.2 Takeaways from the Heideggerian Game Studio
A common concept in the game industry is that realism is not necessarily the most fun (Adams 2014), i.e. that too much realism mars a game with unnecessary rules. For example: playing a game where one is a police officer investigating crimes is a potentially entertaining prospect, but including police paper work for added realism would not enhance the experience. When looking at games from a Heideggerian standpoint it is perhaps easy to assume that it propagates more realism, but that is to miss the point. What Heideggerian game design would tell us is that for digital games to immerse the player in meaningful spaces they need to better understand what makes our own world meaningful to begin with. When a digital game’s systems can be seen as playing the player it has become a presentation of technological nihilism, the game has made the player a resource to be used. Heidegger states that the way out of this is to be open to the releasement toward things, i.e. to acknowledge that technology is a clearing like any other
and that it is dependent upon something greater, thus allowing us to accept technology while refusing to let it level our understanding of being (Heidegger 1975).

Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery give us a vision of a new rootedness which someday might even be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing rootedness in a changed form. (Heidegger 1975, p. 55)

By remembering that the technical side of games, their inherent systems as well as the hardware needed to manifest their worlds, are nothing absolute, that the mechanics of games are dependent on something higher in order to truly shine, we can say yes to everything good that technology brings to game worlds while at the same time saying no to derivative and tired core loops based on rinse and repeat concepts.

The key to this is the fourfold and what it means to dwell poetically, and to belong within the world. This is not a call to strive for greater realism, but towards greater affinity with the essence of humanity. A digital game that allows the player to dwell within the fourfold of sky, earth, mortals and divinities opens up a space where the player can grasp the ungraspable, and come face to face with the mystery of being (Heidegger 2013). The beauty and majesty of nature in *Skyrim* has a small sense of this quality, as does the good death of Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*. They are aspects of their games where the player dwells in that which is holy, that is they invite the player into a space where the world shows up as possessing something that may only be measured by the poet (Ibid.). This means that they bring to experiential presence something that transcends anything that we could put to words. Dwelling in a game world’s fourfold the player should experience it as something for which language is not enough to properly describe, the virtual space becoming one where she experiences the world as something before which she is compelled to stand in awe.

From the fourfold and the notion of making the game a place where the player can dwell, we then naturally come to the conclusion that the fictional people inhabiting a game world too must dwell there, rather than simply exist as sign posts for the player. The fourfold can be seen as a twofold of earth and sky, mortals and divinities. Earth and sky come together in Nature, and here games are already making great strides. The second half of the twofold is culture, or in German; history. For a digital game world to actually be a world it needs a culture and it needs a history, and it needs its digital population to participate in cultural practices. “The fundamental character of dwelling”, says Heidegger, “is this sparing and preserving”, and later he continues; “Mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing” (Heidegger 2013, p. 147, and p. 148). Characters in the game world must care for their world,
rather than the player if, paradoxically, the player is to truly be at home and care for the game world. What would happen if the player was not a god in the game world, but rather part of something holy? If the player is a dweller, instead of a deity, she can truly be the one who spares and preserves, she can be a “guardian” or a “shepherd” (Heidegger 2013).

When the player cares for the game world, she will also fear for its safety, and as an extension she will come to fear the ultimate threat to her and the world’s safety, namely death. The concept of death in games is a typical example of metaphysical reduction, where the enormity of death as something beyond our horizon of intelligibility has been reduced to a mere rule mechanic. But mortals are part of the “simple oneness” (Heidegger 2013, p. 177) of the fourfold because they are initiated into the “mysterious but unfrightening nature of death” (Young 2006, p. 379), our notion of death is a key to our dwelling. Rational beings however, must first overcome their metaphysical reduction and become mortal in order to be capable of death as death. This is what Commander Shepard does at the end of Mass Effect 3, overcoming the loop of meaningless perishing and truly dying a good death, ending the Mass Effect trilogy. Death in digital games has been a part of the basic ruleset since their onset, and the rationality of it has severely reduced the mystery of being itself. The concept of death in digital games as merely a fail state could be supplanted by the sense of a possibility of a side of life within the game world that is averted from both player and its virtual inhabitants. This in turn would allow the game to touch upon the mystery of being itself, allowing players to see reflected their own mortality. They would be able to imagine another horizon concealed by the horizon put before them, and the game would overcome the metaphysical reduction of its many-aspected being through obtrusive systems.

Heideggerian game design theory would have us see games as spaces for players to dwell within, as reservoirs of things not yet disclosed. It would ask us to be open to the notion that any digital game is itself concealing other ones, because the central practices of game design ossifies themselves into the way games are so that we overlook that the disclosure of one horizon always conceals other horizons. Heidegger’s fourfold has inspired architects and town-planners for more than half a decade (Young 2006), and it could be a profound source for insights into how digital games and game worlds ought to be designed.

7.3 Future Studies
On account of the limited format of this thesis there are still many questions and debatable points that for the sake of brevity had to be left out, such as a more intricate reading of the game
world as fourfold space; the moral implications of the contemporary technological nature of digital games; or the existential issues arising from players being in the game. Not to mention a study into how other associated theories, such as Husserl or Derrida, would correspond to a Heideggerian reading. As Heidegger’s definition of art is different from the more traditional views on art, such as aesthetic pleasure, stylistic richness etc., the reading does not concern itself with the traditional definition of art but rather works within the parameters of Heidegger’s thought. However, it would likely be illuminating to attempt similar readings of games as art using other theories, such as formalism or Marxism, to see how they would serve to expand our understanding. This paper would conclude by stressing the need for a more detailed investigation into digital game phenomenology with the intent of formalizing a method of analysis and critique of games as art.
References


**Other sources**


